



Safeguarding IDP voting rights

by Erin Mooney and Balkees Jarrah

Elections are an important means by which IDPs can have a say in the political, economic and social decisions affecting their lives. As citizens of the country in which they are uprooted, IDPs are entitled to vote and participate in public affairs, a right which is affirmed in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.¹ In practice, however, IDP voters often find a number of obstacles put in their way. These include:

- **Lack of documentation:** Displacement frequently results in the loss or confiscation of identity documents, making it difficult for IDPs to register or vote on election day. Obtaining replacement documentation often proves difficult and may require IDPs to return to unsafe areas. Issuing IDPs – women as well as men – with replacement documentation (a right set out in Guiding Principle 20) should be prioritised.
- **Discriminatory practices:** In many cases, IDPs are members of ethnic or religious minority groups who suffer discrimination. In Croatia, displaced Serb voters have in the past faced cumbersome registration procedures, had access to fewer polling stations than displaced Croats and in some cases were barred from voting altogether.
- **Insecurity and acts of intimidation:** In situations of displacement caused by conflict and communal tensions, exercising the right to vote can entail risks to physical security. For instance, IDPs from Chechnya must travel back for each election to home areas that are often unsafe in order to collect a voting certificate. In a number of countries, displaced voters have been harassed en route to or at polling stations. Elections can only be free, fair

and legitimate if voters can cast their ballots without fear of risk or harm.

- **Restrictive residency requirements:** In successor states of the former Soviet Union, lingering influences of the *propiska* system (restricting freedom of movement by tying the exercise of rights to an individual's approved place of residence) continue to hinder IDPs' ability to vote in places other than their area of origin. In Georgia, the legacy of *propiska* was reinforced by the political goal of promoting return and resulted in legal restrictions denying IDPs the right to vote for representatives in the areas where they were 'temporarily' residing. As a result of civil society and international lobbying these restrictions were removed in 2001.
- **Inadequate arrangements for absentee voting:** Security concerns or practical difficulties, such as distance, can make it difficult for IDPs to travel to polling stations. Arrangements for absentee voting are therefore important. In the January 2005 election in Iraq, polling stations were set up in the camps for IDPs who had been displaced from Falluja. Similar arrangements may also be required in Liberia for IDPs remaining in camps when elections are held in October 2005.
- **Lack of timely and clear information:** To enable IDPs to exercise their right to vote, they must have timely information about arrangements in a language they can understand. In the lead-up to the 2003 presidential elections in Chechnya, electoral officials publicly contradicted one another in announcements about IDP voting procedures. In Serbia, the lack of electoral information in the Roma language contributed

to low turnout of Roma IDPs. In Azerbaijan, electoral information was provided only in the Roman alphabet which most IDPs, who had been educated in the Cyrillic alphabet, could not read.²

Left unaddressed, these barriers disenfranchise displaced voters and further exacerbate the marginalisation and exclusion that IDPs so often suffer. They also undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process overall.

National as well as international election officials and monitors should be sensitised to the particular obstacles that IDP voters can face and should systematically monitor and report on how these problems are being addressed. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has recently recognised the importance of paying greater attention to IDPs' voting rights. Other regional organisations engaged in election monitoring as well as the UN Electoral Assistance Division should also ensure that IDPs are freely and fully able to exercise their right to vote.

Forthcoming elections in 2005 in which IDP voting rights should be closely monitored include Croatia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Afghanistan, Liberia and Azerbaijan.

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1. Principle 22 1(d). www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html

2. IOM/Participatory Elections Project. www.iom.int/pep/Electoral_Displacement_in_the_Caucasus1.pdf