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SRI LANKA LAUNCHES COMPUTERIZED VOTER REGISTRY

Washington, DC – FEBRUARY 8, 2007 – Sri Lanka launched the country’s first computerized voter registry today, the result of a two-year project with IFES that began after the 2004 tsunami destroyed paper voter records in Galle. The tsunami showed how a natural disaster could potentially disenfranchise thousands of voters and consequently shake voters’ confidence in their democratic institutions.

“This new registry is a significant step forward in strengthening the electoral process in Sri Lanka,” said United States Ambassador to Sri Lanka Robert Blake at the inaugural ceremony held at the Department of Elections in Colombo. Chairman of the Sri Lankan Parliamentary Committee for Electoral Reforms Dinesh Gunewardane presided over the event which was attended by election officials, political party representatives, nongovernmental organizations and journalists.

When the tsunami hit, the Sri Lankan Department of Elections already had computerized 2 of its 22 election districts, with plans to expand the project as funds became available. IFES in collaboration with the Department of Elections sought donor funding and the United States Agency for International Development came forward to provide this timely support.

Vasu Mohan, IFES deputy director for Europe and Asia, was in Sri Lanka when the tsunami hit. He saw first hand the impact of the tsunami on the Galle district election office.

"Today is an important day for Sri Lanka," said Mohan. "A credible and accurate voter registry is one of the cornerstones of the electoral process, and with the launch of the computerized registry, the Department of Elections has not only modernized the voter records of this country, but also secured it against natural and man-made disasters."

In addition, the computerized system offers several other advantages over the paper system including:

- **Increased accuracy and efficiency:** In the past, election officials retyped the entire voters list of more than 13 million names annually and entered about 2.6 million new changes. Now, election officials only enter in the changes, saving time and leaving less room for error.
- **Faster updates:** The computerized system allows election officials to produce updated electoral registers quickly.
- **Systems to combat error and fraud:** The computerized database alerts election officials to duplicate and erroneous registrations.
- **Easier transliteration:** Transliteration software to convert from Sinhala to Tamil and vice versa is part of the system which enables production of the register in both languages as required by law, more efficient.

IFES, which has helped dozens of countries make similar transitions, advised Sri Lanka’s election officials as they developed a plan for computerization, sought input from community leaders and groups and trained elections staff on the new equipment.

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