Mobile Theatre Primes Afghans for Historic Run-Off Election
Entertaining performances keep momentum of voting issues alive

New York, NY, May 21, 2014 - Bond Street Theatre is extending its Voter Education & Fraud Mitigation project to promote participation in the presidential run-off election taking place on June 14th. The project's sponsor, the United States Institute of Peace, requested the program's continuation in recognition of mobile theatre's wide reach and personal impact. The performances clarify the purpose and value of a follow-up election as an essential part of a democratic political process.

Six Afghan theatre troupes - including three all-women's groups - will present their informative plays in public parks, community centers, women's centers, and schools in Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kunduz provinces, and at other venues where people regularly congregate to reach the widest selection of the population. The troupes especially focus on reaching women, youth, and communities that have little access to electronic media. In many cases, the mobile theatre shows provide their only source of information on the elections.

"These types of programs are important for the society and should be extended to far away districts and villages, because I have met people from far away areas who don't have any awareness about elections and even don't know what elections are," said Hamid Zai Lalai, a Parliamentarian in Nangarhar.

Mobile Theatre's Broad Appeal
Over the past nine months, the troupes, trained by Bond Street Theatre in educational theatre methods, presented 210 performances and 58 workshops that directly reached 130,000 people in six provinces, successfully motivating voters in some of the most difficult and hard-to-reach areas. The impact of the performances was pronounced: the number of audience members who declared their intention to vote increased by 133% in Kunduz, 130% in Nangarhar, and 221% in Kandahar comparing pre- and post-show inquiries.

On April 5th, Afghans took to the polls in record numbers with unexpectedly high participation across the board, including by women and youth. While there were complaints of fraud, fewer votes were disqualified than in all previous elections. The atmosphere among people at the polling stations was one of determination and celebration, and the election has been hailed a success by both Afghan and international leaders.

The election comes at a critical time for Afghanistan and marks the first democratic transition in the nation's history.

Since no candidate received a 50% mandate, the two top contenders -- Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani -- will face each other in a second round or run-off election. The need for an additional election may not be widely understood among the public and could dissolve the general feeling of success among the Afghan population.
Dispelling Voter Doubts
The six Afghan theatre groups have prepared new performances that explain the need for an additional election, stress the value of each individual vote, and dispel doubts that could deter voter participation. The new shows are based on the groups’ prior work, using the same characters that audiences have enjoyed in the past, and adapting the stories to address questions about the run-off election. Each performance includes pre- and post-show activities that gauge the audience’s attitudes and personally respond to audience members’ questions.

Salma, the Director of Kandahar’s first women’s theatre group, was also a monitor at one of the polling sites on election day. Several women recognized her and said: “Do you remember me? I saw your show at the shura and you said I must use my right to vote. And now I am here!”

The Voter Education & Fraud Mitigation Project is funded by the United States Institute for Peace, an organization promoting peace education, conflict resolution, and advancement of state stability and law in Afghanistan since 2002.

Bond Street Theatre has been working for social improvement in Afghanistan since 2002 through programs that build the capacity of local organizations and promote creative thinking and problem-solving, focusing specifically upon women and youth. The Voter Education & Fraud Mitigation Project builds on their Theatre for Social Development program, which prepares local theatre groups to use their skills for public education.

For further information or interview requests, please contact Joanna Sherman or Anna Zastrow at 212-254-4614.

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Bond Street Theatre, founded in 1978, initiates theatre-based projects for education, conflict resolution, and healing in areas of conflict and poverty globally. The company collaborates with local artists to enjoy the benefits of artistic exchange and promotes the value of the arts in shaping a peaceful future. Recipient of a MacArthur Award, the company has also received support from the Trust for Mutual Understanding, ArtsLink, Theatre Communications Group, Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, Association for Performing Arts Presenters, Asian Cultural Council, National Endowment for the Arts, US Institute for Peace, US Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs, US Embassies, and others.

Bond Street Theatre is a not-for-profit organization and an NGO in association with the UN-DPI.

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