United Nations Development Programme

Afghanistan

AFGHANS BEAT KEY OBSTACLE TO ENTERING DIGITAL AGE

4 May 2003 (1382/2/13) Kabul, Afghanistan -- **Afghanistan takes a major leap toward entering the age of digital communication with the release of an important report on Tuesday by a team of Afghan, Iranian and Irish computer experts and linguists. The document provides, for the first time, the comprehensive information needed by software programmers and vendors in order to bring this country's languages to life on computer keyboards and screens.**

"This means that Afghan culture, ideas, innovations and thought can now be communicated via computer, unfiltered, in local Afghan languages," says Ercan Murat, UNDP Country Director for Afghanistan. "Afghanistan will benefit, but so will the world."

Until now, there has been virtually no way for the people of Afghanistan to communicate digitally in their own tongue. With no existing software to support the official languages, Pashto and Dari, the use of computers for communication has been effectively blocked, forcing most government and business offices to rely on typewriters.

The report, ***Computer Locale Requirements for Afghanistan****,* was commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and funded by the EU. It focuses on an esoteric but important area of information technology: the multilingual character encoding and keyboard drivers.

"Unfortunately the big computer software providers who make fonts and software applications that, for instance, support Arabic, do not support the Afghan languages. This causes serious constraints and problems for all aspects of information technology for the entire country," says Michael Everson, project leader and consultant from Everson Typography of Dublin, Ireland. "This study will also help save existing information resources, to be shared and exchanged in the future. We will be urging software companies to ensure that Afghanistan's computing needs are met," Mr. Everson says.

"Language support includes inputting characters on a keyboard, displaying them on a screen, and printing the information. The alphabetical order in which data is expected to be sorted, date and time formatting, calendars, and other cultural-specific locale elements are also involved," explains Roozbeh Pournader, the study's specialist in Arabic-script implementations, from the FarsiWeb Project of Tehran, Iran.

Today less than three per cent of Kabul's population knows how to use a computer. In other regions the computer skills are close to zero. As Pashto and Dari are used by more than 80 per cent of the Afghan population, computer software in these languages will help increase the computer skills of the Afghan people considerably, and be an important tool for human development in the country.

The study offers more information about Pashto and Dari than is currently available for other languages in the region such as Urdu and Persian, the official languages of Pakistan and Iran. The study will be presented to members of the Unicode Consortium and to relevant companies such as Apple, HP, IBM, Microsoft, Red Hat, and Sun. It will also be available online at www.evertype.com/standards/af/.

A press conference will be held at The Ministry of Communications in Kabul at 10:00 am on May 6.

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