

International Herald Tribune
Monday, October 11, 2004

European monitoring group to observe U.S. election

By Thomas Crampton

WASHINGTON: The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has begun deploying 160 people across the United States to scrutinize the presidential election Nov. 2.

The international monitoring comes after the highly disputed presidential election four years ago that took 36 days and a Supreme Court decision to decide. Problems cited in 2000 included those with voting procedures, equipment and registration methods.

As a member of the European security organization, the United States has routinely invited it to monitor American elections, and the State Department did again this year in a June 9 letter. This time, the Poland-based group accepted the invitation, but the acceptance has not proved entirely welcome.

"You are seeing a step toward subor-

ordination of the American political and legal system into a global government," said Representative Jeff Miller, a Florida Republican. "I hope those people just get on the next plane out of the United States to go monitor an election somewhere else, like Afghanistan."

Christian Strohal, director of the organization's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, said no insult was intended.

"We do not come with an attitude to find fault, but we do try to know what the problems are," he said.

He added: "We look at the United States as a country that has undergone a substantial amount of election reform in the last few years. We want to see the progress, and I do think all democracies can learn from each other."

Congress passed the Help America Vote Act in 2002 to address some of those problems, but the observer group

expressed serious concern that disputes would arise again in hard-fought races for Florida and Ohio as well as with newly introduced electronic voting machines that leave no paper trail.

The monitors — none of whom can be American citizens — are drawn from more than 20 of the institution's 55 member states and include 100 Foreign Ministry officials as well as members of parliaments from Kazakhstan, Belarus, Russia and Romania.

In recent months the organization, which specializes in evaluating elections in former dictatorships, has monitored elections in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Russia, Macedonia and Bosnia.

The observers who are members of parliaments will be organized and led by Barbara Haering, a representative for Zurich on the Switzerland National Council who has visited the United States five times.

Haering had never visited Bosnia and Herzegovina before monitoring a general election there in 1998 and does not consider a lack of local knowledge a hindrance.

"We learn about the local culture while monitoring and have advance teams looking out for the issues before we get there," Haering said. "In the United States, we can also find out much of what we need to know from the media and off of the Internet."

Monitoring of the American news media has begun, Haering said, adding that procedures followed guidelines in the organization's handbook.

Among other news media issues, the handbook warns election monitors to be wary of incumbents who confuse campaign events with issues of state and the ability of less well-financed candidates to get coverage.

As for monitoring of polling stations,

Haering said she would probably dispatch observers in groups of six to about 10 states.

"Certainly teams will go to Florida and Ohio," Haering said. "But we do want to be present both in states with difficulties and those that provide examples of best practices."

The use of electronic voting will be of particular interest, Haering said.

"The use of new voting technologies is a challenge for all democracies," she said.

The organization gives no specific guidelines for the best way to run an election, but strict rules govern observers. They are to avoid interfering with the process and are to survey each polling station with a checklist that usually includes questions about voter intimidation and the presence of security forces.

The New York Times