A benchmark for women in politics

By EVAH KUAMIN

THE National Strategic Planning Workshop for women intending to contest the 2012 general elections in Lae aims to set the benchmark for women in politics in the country, the top United Nations diplomat in Papua New Guinea said yesterday.

The Resident Coordinator of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in PNG, David MacLachlan-Karr said the workshop would pave the way for a coordinated approach in the provision of training and advisory services in supporting women candidates intending to participate in the 2012 national and local level government elections.

Mr MacLachlan-Karr said the United Nation's system in PNG, had been a partner in supporting the government's efforts through affirmative action to increase women's formal participation in the parliamentary system since 2006.

He said the leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) of which PNG is a member, called for action in 2004 to address the low levels of women in decision making within the framework of the forum’s Pacific Plan for action on gender equality.

In September 2009, a sub-regional workshop was convened in Port Moresby on temporary special measures for women in the Pacific region.

Mr MacLachlan-Karr said, was very supportive of the regional initiative which resulted in the National Executive Council (NEC) moving for affirmative action.

He stressed that the consolidated efforts of everyone through the UN’s joint technical working group on women in leadership, resulted in the finalisation and drafting of the Women's Bill on the 22 reserved seats.

Mr MacLachlan-Karr reiterated that the UN was keen on seeing the matter proceed whereby PNG could become one of the first nations in the Pacific to take steps for gender equality through legislative action.

By adopting the law on equality and participation, PNG would ensure a parliamentary representation of women by 17% instead of the 9.9%, which the country has experienced over the last two terms of Parliament, Mr MacLachlan-Karr said.

According to Mr MacLachlan-Karr, the internationally recognised minimum benchmark, to ensure a critical mass representation of women parliamentarians, was set at 30% by the 1995 Global Women’s Conference in Beijing, China.

Similarly the Commonwealth Secretariat has called for more women in public leadership positions.

As of May 31, 2010 the proportion of women in parliaments around the world stood at only 19% and with PNG’s 9.9% which, are both well below the global average.

It was generally accepted that a more equitable representation of women in parliament, was required worldwide, to more accurately reflect the composition of society.

Furthermore, it would also help to ensure that women’s diverse interests are taken into account.

Mr MacLachlan-Karr highlighted that although women play important leadership roles in the community and informal organisations, it would appear that their representation in the public office remains inferior to that of men.

He said that whilst the workshop has been deemed timely, participants and people should be mindful about the issues that confront the world today.

Such issues include questions like why there has not been a critical mass of women MPs, despite the Limited Preferential Voting (LPV) system which came into existence in the last general elections in 2007.

Mr MacLachlan-Karr suggested that more was still needed to be done in the area of voter education in encouraging women to sign-up for registration on the electoral roll.

He said the 2007 national election only saw 16% of women voters actually casting the ballot.