

The World of Parliaments

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Speakers present in Geneva.

Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments

The Preparatory Committee for the Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments met in Geneva on 20 and 21 May. It finalized the draft declaration to be adopted by the Conference of Speakers in New York (7-9 September at United Nations Headquarters) and reviewed the latest version of the report on good practices for action taken by parliaments to consolidate their involvement in international affairs. It was apprised of the findings of a panel of experts that is working on drafting a framework for the parliamentary dimension of democracy, and was apprised of the findings of the panel of experts working on the project for a framework for the parliamentary dimension of democracy.

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A new human rights convention for people with disabilities – the critical role of parliamentarians by Ambassador Luis Gallegos

On 1 July, the IPU President, Chilean Senator Sergio Pérez, met the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, J. Dennis Hastert, and the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, United States Congressman Alcee L. Hastings, on the occasion of the 14th Annual Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, in Washington.

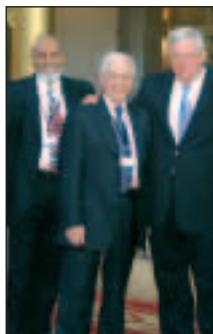


Photo: Philippe Nizolle

KUWAIT GRANTS WOMEN THE RIGHT TO VOTE AND STAND IN ELECTIONS AND APPOINTS A WOMAN MINISTER

"I wish to congratulate Kuwaiti women on their efforts, as well as Kuwaiti legislators and authorities on their decision. Modern societies will only be more humane and more equitable when all of their citizens are actively involved in the decision-making process. The IPU is ready to help if the parliament and the women request it" said the IPU President, Senator Sergio Pérez, during his official visit to Kuwait, after the decision taken by the National Assembly of Kuwait to grant women the right to vote and to stand in elections.

One month after this historic decision, Mrs. Massouma al-Mubarak, a political science professor and columnist, was named as Planning Minister and Minister for Administrative Development. She told AFP news agency it was "a great honour for Kuwaiti women and a symbol of appreciation of their struggle" for her to be named to a cabinet post.



The IPU President, Senator Sergio Pérez, welcomed by the Speaker of the National Assembly of Kuwait, Mr. Jasem Mohammad Al-Khurafi.

Photo: National Assembly of Kuwait

"DEMOCRACY HAS PREVAILED"

The Speaker of the National Assembly of Kuwait gave The World of Parliaments his views on the impact of such a decision. Interview.

Q.: Was it difficult to convince the members of the National Assembly to grant women their political rights?

Speaker Jasem Mohammad Al-Khurafi: We are proud that we have achieved what we have achieved in a democratic way, and that it has not been forced on the country or decided by the Emir or by one person. It went through the constitutional process. It took time, but in the end, those who were in favour of the decision and those who were against it are convinced that democracy has prevailed and that we all have to accept what the majority has decided.

Q.: Is there a chance that women will participate soon in parliamentary life?

J. M. A-K.: It will take time, because our country is in an area where we have traditions and we have different thought processes from a religious point of view. But time has matured us and gave us the opportunity to accept progress. Although our women obtained the right to vote only recently, I am sure you have noticed that they are present at different levels of government and that they have reached top positions in the private sector.

Q: What do you expect from the IPU?

J. M. A-K.: The IPU has done its job by bringing pressure to bear in following up on the rights of women. It will now be in a position to follow up on the successes the women have achieved in Kuwait.

SEMINAR ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

"The freedom of expression enjoyed by parliamentarians depends to a great extent on the freedom of expression enjoyed in society in general. As legislators, parliamentarians have a special responsibility for ensuring an environment favourable to free expression" said Mr. Emile Guirieoulou, President of the Committee on General and Institutional Affairs and member of the National Assembly of Côte d'Ivoire, and Rapporteur of the Seminar on Freedom of Expression, Parliament and the Promotion of Tolerant Societies, held from 25 to 27 May 2005, at the House of Parliaments.

Given the chilling effect of defamation suits, parliamentarians should respond publicly to criticism rather than resorting to the justice system. The Seminar's Rapporteur stressed that while diversity of the media is important, such diversity is only meaningful if it allows for the expression of a diversity of opinions. Mr. Guirieoulou underlined the importance for parliamentarians of access to information and pointed out that by the same token, parliaments too were required to provide access to the information they held.

He stressed that by fighting hate speech, parliamentarians were pursuing the basic aim of ensuring respect for equality, and that they should play a much more active role in this field, explaining that "the problems of hatred and discrimination with which all countries are confronted must be tackled by means of a comprehensive strategy to promote equality and respect for others and their difference". The Seminar, organized by the IPU and Article 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression, an expert organization in the field of freedom of expression, recommended that all parliaments set up human rights committees, and invited the IPU to continue holding parliamentary workshops on human rights issues. It was designed specifically for chairpersons and members of parliamentary human rights committees, and was thus the second seminar organized by the IPU for this specific audience, the first one having taken place in March 2004.

Freedom of expression is the main working tool of members of parliament. Its exercise, however, is not always easy, as it is not an absolute right and requires respect for certain limitations. The approximately 100 members of parliaments from over 40 countries who attended the Seminar discussed in a very open and frank manner issues related to defamation and the right to privacy, access to information, freedom of the press, the risks created by increasing media concentration, the limits within which criticism of the judiciary should be allowed, parliamentary immunity and hate speech.



Photo IPU/LeBlin

Some 100 members of parliament from over 40 countries attended the Seminar on freedom of expression organized by the IPU and Article 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE SECOND CONFERENCE OF SPEAKERS OF PARLIAMENTS AS SEEN BY THE SPEAKERS PRESENT IN GENEVA

Strong commitment to the development of democracy

I hope that there will be a strong commitment to the development of democracy within the representative system and outside. There should be participation by parliamentarians in the international organizations. Every week, probably hundreds of members of parliaments take part in conferences. The IPU could be an important clearing house for arranging and coordinating all these various invitations. What are the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization calling for? The IPU could promote the participation of parliamentarians, women and men, with their responsibilities and expertise of daily business, going out with their proposals and bringing back what other people said.

Mr. Björn von Sydow, Speaker of the Riksdag, Sweden

What the IPU has done and what it proposes to do

The main challenge is to investigate the extent to which the United Nations has succeeded in implementing the Millennium Development Goals, and for the IPU the role it has played in cooperation with the United Nations towards the implementation of those goals. Secondly, we must consider the extent to which the IPU has taken advantage of the observer status that was accorded to it by the United Nations: what has it done, and what does it propose to do?

Mr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, Speaker of the National Assembly, Namibia

The possibility to talk with the whole world

The main challenge is the possibility to talk with the whole world. In this Speakers' Conference, the highest level of elected representatives will come together. We will adopt a common declaration, and we can speak about everything that we feel democratic society can do for the people.

Mrs. Ingrida Udre, Chairperson of the Saeima, Latvia

To listen carefully to the needs of the people

I would like to see these two challenges addressed: the most important thing is to have peace and security in the world. The whole world should come together to fight the lack of balance that we have so far seen in the campaign against terror, because this has changed our lives in the last five years. Secondly, we hope that the

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developed countries will listen carefully to the needs of the people rather than saying something theoretical about subjects such as human rights and gender issues. They should say why there are those problems.

Mr. Abdul Hadi Al-Majali, Speaker of the House of Deputies, Jordan

To make our government take into account the parliamentary view on international negotiations

The main challenge is to actualize what we have been trying to achieve since 2000, which is to make our governments take into account the parliamentary view on international negotiations, so that governments do not do things on their own. Through the views of the people's representatives, governments must always take into account what their citizens think on special issues.

Mr. Francis Ole-Kaparo, Speaker of the National Assembly, Kenya

Ensure that parliaments help strengthen democracy in their countries and throughout the world

I see two basic challenges: the first is to ensure that parliaments take part in defining international policy. The second is to make sure that parliaments help strengthen democracy in their countries and throughout the world.

Mr. Guy Nzouma Ndama, President of the National Assembly, Gabon

Developing trust and dialogue between cultures

This Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments is taking place in circumstances that are much more difficult than those of its predecessor. The world situation has worsened in all respects - politically as well as militarily, economically, socially and culturally. This Conference is being held after September 11th, after Iraq and Afghanistan, after the natural disasters and after Africa has fallen behind and its situation has worsened. The objectives are still the same: peace, security and stability in the world. We must develop trust and dialogue between cultures, civilizations and religions and redouble our efforts to combat poverty, illiteracy and destitution.

Mr. Abdelwahed Radi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Morocco

Editorial

Recognition of political rights of Kuwaiti women

After a good deal of effort, in May the National Assembly of Kuwait finally granted women the right to vote and stand for election. During his official visit to Kuwait shortly after the adoption of this measure, IPU President Sergio Pérez paid tribute to the parliamentarians who adopted this measure and to the women who had waged a long campaign for political rights. One month after the measure was adopted, the Kuwaiti Government named the country's first woman minister.

The lot of Kuwaiti women is changing. Their political rights were not recognized for dozens of years, despite the fact that they played a very important role in society, with many women active in the country's diplomatic life and in its economy. That era has now passed, and there is no doubt that this major step will have an important impact on Kuwaiti society. Mathematically speaking, more women than men will be eligible to vote in the next legislative elections, scheduled for 2007.

Despite their enthusiasm, the members of the Board of the Women's Cultural and Social Society, the oldest women's group in Kuwait, are perfectly aware of the fact that the real battle has only just begun. While previously decisions about women's political participation depended on the views of men, now it is for Kuwaiti women to convince the whole of society that the time has come to elect women as representatives to the National Assembly. Kuwaiti women take pride in being the best educated women in the Arab world. They know that now they can make a difference. One of the members of the Board explained, "I have two daughters. The elder, who has just finished her university studies, wants to run in the 2007 elections. We will not necessarily vote for women, though; we will choose the person who is best prepared." In her view, Kuwaiti women will not vote for token candidates; they will seek the most capable people and vote for them in the 2007 elections. They are conscious of the fact that the traditional segment of Kuwaiti society is extremely capable of mobilizing forces and getting out the vote.

Can the Kuwaiti situation have an impact on other Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, where women are still not allowed to vote and stand for election? "Of course", says Mr. Abdul Rahman H. Al'attiyah, the Secretary-General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (Gulf Cooperation Council). "In the other Gulf States, women have assumed their rights, or they will soon do so; this will not be difficult now that Kuwaiti women have secured their rights. We look forward to it happening soon."

The dialogue promoted by the IPU to support partnership between men and women in politics must continue in all regions of the world. In terms of women's participation, the Arab world is changing slowly but surely. After his visit to Kuwait, the IPU President went on to Bahrain, where Her Highness Shaikha Sabika bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, the wife of the King and Chairperson of the Supreme Council for Women, officially requested the IPU's support in promoting women's political participation.

L.B.

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPINES' SENATOR PIA CAYETANO



Photo Senate of the Philippines

"There needs to be recognition that violence against women and children in armed conflicts exists"

More than 160 women legislators from 120 countries attending the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians in Manila - as part of the 112th IPU Assembly - celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the Meeting. The Meeting was called "symbolic of women's struggles" by Philippine Senator Pia Cayetano, who was elected president of the Manila session of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, and also selected to chair the Assembly's panel on violence against women and children in armed conflicts. Interview.

Q.: How would you describe the situation of women today?

Senator Pia Cayetano: In many countries women are still deprived of their rights and are victims of oppression. Only 14 countries meet the IPU's goal of 30 per cent women parliamentarians. Nonetheless, there have been some significant achievements. Twenty years ago, women parliamentarians met on the fringes of the IPU Assembly. Now they have their own meeting. A great number of women parliamentarians are present this year. In the lower house of the Philippine parliament, 15 per cent of members are women, in the upper house the proportion is 17 per cent, and 25 per cent of ministers are women. In addition, the Head of State is a woman. President Arroyo is promoting a gender equality agenda. Women's voices will be heard at the Meeting and solutions will be found to their problems.

Q.: What would you recommend to solve the problem of violence committed against women and children in armed conflicts, for example?

P.C.: First of all, it is a question of information and awareness. There needs to be recognition that this special situation affecting women and children exists. In any war there is death and injuries, but the majority of civilian victims are women and children. They are more defenceless and there are specific sex crimes that happen to women and children which a lot of people either do not recognize, or just turn a blind eye to. In a lot of areas the situation arises where such crimes are almost tolerated, because men are occupying the field and men have needs. It has to be made known that it is absolutely not acceptable. Information should also be given to peace forces that come in, because some studies have shown that even peacekeeping forces can be the perpetrators of abuses, and particularly of sexual abuses.

Q.: Is this just a fait accompli, or can we act to make a difference?

P.C.: Let me give you a case in point on the information aspect first. In some countries such as the Philippines and Korea, many years ago in the 1940s, during the Second World War, the situation arose. Today, part of my constituents are these old women who were called "comfort women". You would think that this is something that happened only 60 years ago, but it is happening now. There seems to be a lack of understanding, a lack of awareness because this is still happening now. There are international treaties already in place, but we may need local laws in different areas to strengthen these international treaties. It is important to inform legislative bodies in each country. Agencies have to be strict about implementing this. Parliamentarians and persons of authority should continue to be very vocal about condemning these acts. A specific recommendation would be to go on nationwide TV and condemn the persons involved, whether military or civilian.

IPU AND UNICEF LAUNCH HANDBOOK ON WAYS TO COMBAT CHILD TRAFFICKING

In Manila, the IPU and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) launched a handbook for parliamentarians entitled *Combating Child Trafficking*. UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy urged legislators to use their power to protect children from exploitation, saying "they can make decisions that ensure the protection of children, or they can make decisions that leave children vulnerable to being exploited and abused. The first choice virtually guarantees strong national development; the second choice virtually guarantees the continuation of poverty".



Photo Senate of the Philippines

From left to right : Mr. Franklin M. Drilon, President of the Philippine Senate and President of the IPU's 112th Assembly, Ms. Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Executive Director, Senator Sergio Páez, IPU President, and Mr. Anders B. Johnsson, IPU Secretary General.

WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS MARK 20 YEARS OF PROGRESS ON THE POLITICAL FRONT

In 1889, no women were among the founders of the IPU; at that time only a few countries had granted women the right to vote and stand for election. In 1921, two women, from Germany and Denmark, were the first to take part in the deliberations of an IPU Conference, along with 108 men. If the beginnings may sound inauspicious to women's participation, the situation is strikingly more positive today: women parliamentarians now account for nearly 30 per cent of participants at IPU Assemblies.

One of the driving forces of this progress is the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians, which celebrated the twentieth anniversary of its establishment during the 112th IPU Assembly, held in Manila. In an atmosphere of solidarity and pride, the Meeting took stock of past achievements, but also of future challenges in the fight for equal opportunities and rights.

The history of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians is that of a constant struggle, marked by steady progress. When the first Meeting organized by the IPU Secretariat was held in Lomé in 1985, only 26 women legislators were present, and women's concerns and rights were considered marginal to the IPU and mainstream politics in a great number of countries. Fast-forward now to the Manila Meeting: 160 women from 120 countries were present to debate practical issues such as domestic violence and the impact of HIV/AIDS on women's lives.

The initial purpose of the Meeting of Women Parliamentarians was to provide women with a space of their own to meet and join forces in bringing forward questions generally ignored in IPU debates and on the international scene – such as cultural obstacles hampering women's lives, or gender equality in politics and in the workplace. "As long as women are underrepresented in positions of power, there will be a need for them to get together to encourage each other and to work together" declared Senator J. Fraser of Canada.

Down the line, one can say that the women's movement at the IPU has been a definite factor of progress and change. Over time, the Meeting has gained in legitimacy and force. Its objectives have been materializing at the global political level, with a quantitative and qualitative improvement in the political participation of women. The Meeting has also given the IPU a trademark absolutely its own: it is the global reference point for statistics on the participation of women in political life. It has also helped to change mentalities and pushed male colleagues to mainstream gender issues in declarations and resolutions of the IPU. The Meeting has pressed for gender analysis of parliaments' budgets – including that of the IPU.

To celebrate the twentieth anniversary and pay tribute to all the women and men that contributed to this success, an exhibit on the history of women at the IPU was inaugurated.

THE HISTORY OF THE MEETING OF WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS:

Research topic at the University of Geneva

1978-1999: The Meeting of Women Parliamentarians in the Inter-Parliamentary Union was the title of a dissertation presented in April 2005 at the University of Geneva's Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences by Ms. Annalisa Sauli de Gironcoli as part of her postgraduate certificate in gender studies.

This work highlights the struggle of women active in the transnational field to use their participation to end "exclusion" and ensure their "presence" in the political arena. It explains the success of this struggle by a combination of four factors: the very active presence of a group of women parliamentarians; the desire for openness of the IPU, which seeks a greater sphere of influence; the favourable international situation resulting from a period of political calm; and the dynamism of feminist circles following the Decade for Women.

This study aims to demonstrate that the change of policy in respect of women at the IPU is the fruit of interaction between the work of a few women sensitive to gender equality issues and a particularly favourable international situation, along with an organization that hoped to increase its sphere of action within the international community. The work of women parliamentarians fits perfectly well with the international movement for women's rights launched by the United Nations. It provides a new impetus to numerous studies and discussions on the status of women in the world, making use of the Union's enormous potential for information and its structures, as well as its political authority. For its part, the Union has seen its cooperation with the United Nations enhanced by its will to tackle gender discrimination issues.



Inauguration of the exhibition of the Meeting of Women parliamentarians

Photo: Senate of the Philippines

PROTECTING MIGRANTS

LOOKING FOR WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS

Although it is a human right to leave one's own country, there is no corresponding right to enter others. This point, made at a panel discussion on migration and development held during the Manila Assembly, served to trigger a discussion on some of the wider issues surrounding migration. Two panellists presented the topic from their respective standpoints: Mr. Jan Karlsson, Co-Chair of the Global Commission on International Migration, and Mr. Tomas Achacoso, former Administrator of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration.

Mr. Karlsson pointed out that the Global Commission on International Migration had been set up to seek a coherent response to migration issues. Using demography, development and democracy as the three main indicators, the Commission's remit had been to identify the principal reasons for migration. For example, poor employment prospects in countries of origin were often powerful stimuli, and unfilled jobs in some developed countries with ageing populations and low birth rates offered attractive opportunities. In many cases, people were driven to migrate by the desire to live where the democratic framework went beyond formal democracy and provided a genuinely free and fair society that was well governed, secure and free from conflict. An important part of the Commission's remit had been to review the whole problem of human trafficking, in particular its effect on the growing number of women involved and on countries' development processes. Another of its tasks had been to develop a win-win strategy that would enable the shared interests of countries with ageing populations and low fertility rates and those with young workforces to be fully realized.

Migration could have a significant impact on poverty alleviation, and consequently on the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. In the year 2000, the remittances of overseas workers to their countries of origin had come to twice the amount of official development assistance. However, remittances alone would not guarantee an increase in countries' overall well-being. India provided an excellent example of a "virtuous circle" where the economy benefited greatly not only from remittances from its citizens overseas, but also from investment, capital formation and job creation by returnees from abroad. On the other hand, Africa continued to lose the majority of its health professionals, mainly to the West, with a resultant negative impact on development.

Mr. Achacoso agreed that there was a growing awareness that many developed countries would face the dual problem

of declining birth rates and ageing populations, while the majority of developing countries with young and growing populations would continue to remain poor and politically unstable. In the prevailing climate, the developed countries, whose demographic reality required them to bring in migrant workers, in fact adopted immigration policies that prevented them from doing so. Such a situation necessitated research into win-win solutions for both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries, bearing in mind that in many developed countries birth rates had fallen low enough to generate concerns about a demographic collapse.

The time had come, added Mr. Achacoso, for the labour-receiving countries to consider playing a more active role in the development of skills and qualifications in potential labour-sending countries. For example, the educational systems of labour-surplus economies could benefit from financial input to

enable them to accommodate both domestic needs and international demand. Such financial assistance might also serve to compensate labour-sending countries for the possible negative effects of the "brain drain" on their economies. In fact, the World Bank had called for developed countries that recruited skilled workers from developing countries to compensate those countries for their lost investment in human capital.

The Philippines was one of the largest suppliers of

migrant workers to the world. It was also admired for the innovative mechanisms it had developed to promote and protect the interests of its workers. National legislation was designed to extend justice to aggrieved workers on their return to the Philippines, even when contractual violations might have occurred in the country of employment. It was also significant that the whole cabinet, including the President, took collective responsibility for the management of the migration programme.

International organizations such as the IPU could encourage governments to support institutional changes that would benefit migrant workers. The management of international migration should be the responsibility of both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries. The challenge for parliamentarians was to implement legislation that would provide an enabling and protective environment for the establishment of a migration framework. The meeting agreed that the most significant contribution that parliaments could make towards achieving positive outcomes from migration for the international community as a whole would be to require their government ministries to introduce coherence and coordination between their respective policies and to ensure that migration was fully integrated in those policies.



Philippino teens in Milan.

Photo: Oxfam

THE PERCEIVED LOSS OF "SOVEREIGNTY" DUE TO WTO ACCORDS: SHOULD PARLIAMENTARIANS BE CONCERNED?

In recent years, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has established a tradition of holding annual public symposia where participants from governments, parliaments, civil society, the business sector, academia and the media jointly reflect upon the functioning of the multilateral trading system and analyse the institutional state of the WTO. The IPU has been associated with the WTO public symposia. On a number of occasions, it has organized parliamentary events as part of their overall programmes.

The 2005 WTO Public Symposium was held in Geneva from 20 to 22 April and took on special significance as it coincided with the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the WTO. In keeping with the tradition, the IPU organized an interactive parliamentary panel within the framework of the WTO Symposium. The panel discussion took place on 22 April 2005 and focused on the theme *The WTO at 10*. The perceived loss of "sovereignty" due to WTO accords: Should parliamentarians be concerned?

The choice of this theme was much influenced by the recently published report entitled *The future of the WTO: Addressing institutional challenges in the new millennium*, prepared by the Consultative Board to the WTO Director-General, which devoted a whole chapter to the issue of the perceived loss of "sovereignty" as a result of WTO accords. The authors of the report observed that there was a perception, often amplified in political and media circles, that States were progressively losing their ability to decide for themselves their own policy directions and priorities, and that this was so because of WTO restrictions on their policy space. The authors concluded however that, contrary to this perception, in committing to the WTO procedures and principles, governments were returning to themselves a degree of "sovereignty" that had been lost through the process of globalization. If they were partly losing their capacity to regulate domestically, governments



At the podium, the panellists were (from left to right), Mr. Mohammed Khoshchreh, Mr. Anthony Hill, Mr. Enrique Barón Crespo, Ms. Laurence Boisson de Chazournes, and Mr. Kimmo Sasi.

were reclaiming some control of their economic destinies at the multilateral level.

This issue of the perceived loss of "sovereignty" is of course of special interest to legislators, who as elected representatives of the people have their own - and very important - share of responsibility in these matters. This alone explains why the panel discussion was well attended and provided much food for thought.

The moderator of the panel was Mr. Enrique Barón Crespo, President of the European Parliament (EP) from 1989 to 1992 and currently Chairman of the EP's Committee on International Trade, which follows WTO negotiations. Members of the panel included Ms. Laurence Boisson de Chazournes, Professor of International Law at the University of Geneva; Mr. Anthony Hill, former Ambassador of Jamaica to the United Nations Office at Geneva; Mr. Mohammed Khoshchreh, member of the Majlis Shoraye Eslami, the parliament of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and Mr. Kimmo Sasi, member of the Finnish parliament and representative in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Full texts of their presentations are available on the WTO website.

A NEW HUMAN RIGHTS CONVENTION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES – THE CRITICAL ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS

by Luis GALLEGOS¹

As many will by now be aware, the United Nations is currently negotiating a new human rights convention: an international convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. This will be the first such international convention specifically addressing the rights of the more than 600 million persons with disabilities worldwide. Once it is adopted, IPU Members will have a critical role to play in translating this ground-breaking convention into national law.

The current effort began in 2001, when the Government of Mexico put forward a proposal before the United Nations General Assembly, resulting in the adoption of a resolution on 28 November 2001.

The resolution called for the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee mandated to elaborate “a comprehensive and integral international convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, based on the holistic approach in the work done in the field of social development, human rights and non-discrimination.”²

The early stages of the process centred on building the case for a convention specifically addressing the rights of people with disabilities. It soon became clear that the laws of many countries addressed disability issues in an outdated manner, either ignoring them altogether, or often

starting from the paternalistic and false assumption that people with disabilities are objects of charity, consigned to dependence on family or society. Moreover, it was also quite clear that existing human rights documents did not adequately address the multiple barriers that disabled people faced in accessing their human rights. Most legally binding human rights treaties fail to address the issue of disability at all, and those that include some reference to it do so in a fragmented and often paternalistic manner. There are no disability-specific legally binding treaties at the international level, and only one such treaty at the regional level. A convention will once and for all establish a positive, rights-based framework in which to view and include people with disabilities.

At the outset of the second session of the Ad Hoc Committee (June 2003), the case was won for proceeding with the development of a new convention, and attention centred on the process by which the convention would be negotiated. Subsequent sessions of the Ad Hoc Committee and its Working Group (January 2004) initiated the actual process of formulating a convention text.

The process is remarkable for its active engagement of people with disabilities themselves. Disability advocates from every corner of the globe have worked tirelessly,

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Photos: United Nations

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, and Ambassador Luis Gallegos of Ecuador.

1. Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the United Nations and Chairman until 30 March 2005 of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities.

2. United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/168, entitled Comprehensive and integral international convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities of 19 December 2001.



(Coming from page 8)

side-by-side with governments and United Nations agencies, offering innovative solutions to address the barriers that the convention is trying to confront. This participation by people with disabilities serving both in government delegations and as members of grass-roots disabled peoples' organizations, has significantly informed the process. There can be no doubt that the convention that emerges from this interactive process will be fundamentally shaped by their involvement.

As a result of consultations at national, regional and international levels since the Ad Hoc Committee was established, new networks and communities of disability-sensitized policy makers, programme specialists, academics and advocates have emerged. Together, they are contributing to a process of promoting and developing universal norms, and thereby contributing to the implementation of human rights for all.

Parliamentarians with disabilities are already playing a unique and important role in this process. For example, the Honourable James Mwandha, a member of the Ugandan National Assembly, has been a key member of his country's delegations. In March 2004, members of the Human Rights Caucus of the United States Congress convened a briefing on the convention process along with several disabled members of Congress. In July 2002, the Peruvian Congress hosted a panel presentation on the convention, in conjunction with a regional meeting of advocates representing Disabled Peoples International.

Once the convention has been adopted, the role of parliamentarians will only increase in importance. Not only will parliaments be responsible for ratifying the convention and ensuring that it enters into force; they will also have primary responsibility for amending or introducing implementing legislation and finding creative practical solutions to give life to the principles and provisions of the convention. In all of these activities, consultation and collaboration with disabled people and their representative organizations will be an essential ingredient.

The ongoing international discourse on disability rights demonstrates a common goal of humankind - to establish an integrated community of all people based upon the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms. As we strive to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities through work on this new convention, we are embarking upon a significant endeavour in translating into reality the notion of the dignity and worth of every human being. Those in the Ad Hoc Committee and the thousands of disability advocates will rely on the expertise of parliamentarians around the world to work with us to support this important effort to take concrete action towards building just and equitable societies for all.

... READ IN THE PRESS ...

Bahraini women's success highlighted

HM the King's wife and Chairperson of the Supreme Council for Women, Her Highness Shaikha Sabika bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, yesterday received at Rowdha Palace the delegation of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), led by its President, Sergio Pérez. Shaikha Sabika wished the delegation a fruitful visit to widen cooperation between the IPU and the Council. She highlighted the IPU's project that related to supporting the political participation of Bahraini women. The Council had accredited a programme prepared in cooperation with UNDP with the participation of official and public bodies and religious scholars, and she underscored the efforts made by the Council to implement the project to enable Bahraini women to take part in the political process by allowing them to contest parliamentary and municipal elections.

Bahrain Tribune – 13 June 2005

Women fill most of PQ's leading posts

When Louise Harel was appointed interim leader of the Quebec opposition this week to replace Bernard Landry, the Parti Québécois (PQ), without fanfare, became a party ruled by women. The PQ has become the only major political party in the country where women hold almost all of the influential positions.... "The numbers show that the Quebec National Assembly has the largest percentage of female elected members in Canada", Ms. Harel said. She quoted statistics published in 2004 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, showing that women made up 25 per cent of elected members in only 24 out of 180 countries or jurisdictions. Quebec's share of elected women in 32 per cent.

www.theglobeandmail.com (Canada) – 8 June 2005



Photo: Victor Iovsca

IPU President says visit to Kuwait very important

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) President, Chilean Senator Sergio Pérez, noted that his visit to Kuwait that starts Monday is very important in the wake of the Kuwaiti parliaments' resolution to grant women the right to vote and to stand for elections. Pérez stressed that he has requested to meet with the women of Kuwait who have brought about this important victory.

Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) – 22 May 2005

Sitting on a well of gold

Finding women with veiled faces is not at all uncommon in the streets of Kuwait City. But do not be misled; they now have nearly the same rights as men. Getting there was not easy. In fact, just this month women were granted the right to vote and to stand for election to the parliament. This was one of the things that the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Chilean Senator Sergio Pérez Verdugo found out about during a recent visit to the country. As one of its main objectives, the IPU, based in Geneva, Switzerland, has sought to ensure the full inclusion of women in society. Its directors were thus quite pleased with this development.

El Llanquihue (Chile) – 29 May 2005

The IPU and UNITAR combine efforts to ensure an effective parliamentary contribution to sustainable development

In February 2004 the IPU and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) signed a five-year partnership agreement aimed at jointly implementing a "capacity-building initiative for parliaments on sustainable development". This joint project was launched on 22 and 23 April 2005 at the Luxembourg Palace in Paris, seat of the French Senate, at an inaugural conference which brought together over 160 parliamentarians and numerous parliamentary staff members from nearly 70 countries.

For two days, the participants worked with the help of experts on three main subjects: water management, energy and climate change, and trade for sustainable development. The reports of the specialized working groups formed on these subjects highlighted the challenges in these fields, the roles of parliamentarians and opportunities for them to take action. They made it possible to define the priorities that must be taken into consideration in the awareness campaigns that the IPU and UNITAR are planning on organizing at the regional and national levels.

This common initiative has the aim of helping parliamentarians to better understand the stakes of sustainable development, so as to integrate it better into national policies and legislation. It is intended to allow parliamentarians to follow up on the World Summit for Social Development and the international declarations and agreements on the Millennium Development Goals. Parliamentarians will thus be able to advocate solutions involving a comprehensive approach, taking into consideration the environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainable development, with a special focus on health and poverty. Lastly, the IPU-UNITAR initiative should eventually make it possible to identify emerging problems, with a view to allowing parliamentarians to carry out their mission of implementing sustainable development.

In June 2004, a needs assessment conducted among the parliaments of the entire world allowed the IPU and UNITAR to define the main thrusts of their awareness programme for parliamentarians on this subject.

Parliamentary developments

BURUNDI

After numerous postponements, a new Constitution was approved by an overwhelming majority of 90.1 per cent of voters in a referendum held on 28 February 2005. The Constitution provides for the sharing of power between Tutsis and Hutus, the main ethnic groups which make up respectively 14 and 85 per cent of the population. Of the seats in the National Assembly, 40 per cent will be reserved for Tutsis, while Hutus will have 60 per cent. Seats in the Senate will be shared equally between the two groups. The first election to be held under the new Constitution, originally scheduled for 22 April 2005, has been postponed to 4 July 2005, to be followed by presidential elections on 19 August 2005. The transition period is due to end on 26 October 2005.

CANADA

Following the election of a disabled person to the House of Commons, modifications were made to the House's Standing Orders to "permit the full participation in the proceedings of the House of any Member with a disability". This allows the Speaker to exempt such a member from the requirement to stand for debate and voting. Disabled MPs are now allowed to be accompanied by an assistant on the floor of the House.

EGYPT

On 8 and 10 May respectively, the upper and lower houses of the Egyptian parliament adopted a constitutional amendment paving the way for the first multi-candidate presidential elections. Under the old system, the parliament chose a single presidential candidate and Egyptians could vote only for or against that candidate in a referendum. Following the amendment, the electorate will vote for presidential candidates in a direct, secret ballot. Presidential candidates are required to fulfill a number of conditions. They must be a member of an official political party which has existed for at least five years or, if running as an independent, obtain the support of a wide range of elected representatives, including a minimum of 65 recommendations from the lower house, 25 from the upper house and 10 from the members of the local

(Follow up on page 11)



Photo: French Senate

Over 160 parliamentarians and numerous parliamentary staff members from nearly 70 countries took part in the initiative launched in Paris by the IPU and UNITAR.

(Coming from page 10)

councils located in at least 14 of the country's governorates. The first presidential election to be held under the revised electoral law is scheduled for September 2005.

GERMANY

On 21 December 2004, the Twenty-Fifth Act to Amend the Act on the Legal Status of Members of the German Bundestag and the Twenty-First Act to Amend the Act on the Legal Status of Members of the European Parliament were published in the Federal Law Gazette. The amendments lay down various cost-cutting measures, in particular the gradual reduction of pension benefits payable to German parliamentarians and their surviving dependants. Members will also now pay the full contribution to their health insurance. The amendment to the Act on the Legal Status of Members of the European Parliament harmonizes the benefits payable to German members of the European Parliament with those accruing to members of the German parliament.

GEORGIA

On 17 February 2005, the Georgian parliament approved several constitutional amendments concerning the organization of the legislative branch. From the next legislative elections in 2008, the size of the parliament will be reduced from 230 to 150 deputies. Of these, 100 members will be elected from party lists, while 50 others will be returned from single-seat constituencies.

IRAQ

Elections for the 275-seat Transitional National Assembly (TNA) were held on 31 January 2005. An estimated eight million people voted. The Shia United Iraqi Alliance won a majority of the seats, while a coalition of Kurdish parties came second in the poll. While the Transitional Administrative Law reserves 25 per cent of the TNA's seats for women, 87 women won seats in the election, accounting for 32 per cent of the membership. On 16 March, the TNA met for the first time. On 6 April 2005, it elected Mr. Jalal Talabani President of Iraq, following the election of Mr. Hachem al-Hassani as Speaker of the TNA. Extra time was required to reach agreement on the composition of the new Government. Finally, the first democratically elected Government in 50 years was sworn in on 3 May. The main task of the TNA is to prepare a draft Constitution by 15 August (with a possibility of extension of the deadline for up to six months), to be submitted for approval by referendum by 15 October. Elections are to be held by 15 December, to pave the way for a new Government to take power on 31 December 2005.

KENYA

The National Rainbow Coalition came to power in December 2002, promising a new Constitution to replace the current one, which dates from the country's independence in 1961. On 15 March 2004, the long-awaited draft of the new Constitution was finalized by delegates of the National Constitutional Conference, consisting of members of parliament, elected representatives from each district as well as representatives from civil society and religious and professional bodies. A proposal to reduce presidential powers, which went against the

3. Ms. Lamia Abed Khadouri, a member of former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's coalition, was killed on 27 April 2005.

Government's wishes, and to create a post of executive Prime Minister raised a great deal of controversy. Although President Kibaki announced that the new Constitution would be adopted by the parliament, Kenya's High Court ruled that the draft must be approved in a referendum. On 29 December 2004, President Kibaki signed the Constitution Review Bill, which became law upon publication in the Kenya Gazette, on 22 April 2005. A simple majority of Members of the National Assembly, instead of a two-thirds majority, is now required to amend and approve the draft Constitution. Once the draft is passed by the parliament, the Attorney-General will draw up the final draft, which will be submitted for approval in a national referendum. According to the same Gazette, only registered voters will participate in the referendum, which is scheduled for late 2005; a simple majority vote will suffice to pass the Constitution.

KYRGYZSTAN

In accordance with the results of a referendum held in February 2003, a unicameral parliament has been introduced. The 75-seat Supreme Council (Jorgoku Kenesh) replaces the 45-seat Assembly of People's Representatives and the 60-seat Legislative Assembly. The term of members remains unchanged: five years. The first elections to the Supreme Council were held on 27 February 2005. Complaints about irregularities during the election process fuelled protests in the south, which spread throughout the country, leading to the sudden departure of President Akayev on 24 March and the collapse of the Government. A legislative crisis loomed amid calls for the bicameral parliament to be reinstated, until 29 March when the members of the outgoing parliament voted to dissolve that body, clearing the way for the installation of the new unicameral legislature. The incoming parliament confirmed Mr. Kurmanbek Bakiev as interim President and Prime Minister, and scheduled a special presidential election for 10 July 2005.

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

On 15 April 2005, the lower house (State Duma) adopted the Political Parties (Amendment) Bill (No. 96886-4) and the State Duma of the Federal Assembly (Elections) Bill (No. 118923-4). The amendment to the Political Parties Act increases the required minimum party membership from 10,000 to 15,000 and establishes a transition period during which political parties that are already registered must increase their membership to 15,000. It stipulates that if an existing party is unable to fulfil the requirement, it must forfeit its status as a political party and transform itself into a voluntary association, or be dissolved. The State Duma of the Federal Assembly (Elections) Bill (No. 118923-4) stipulates that as of 2007 all 450 deputies in the lower house will be elected from party lists, drawn up pursuant to the Political Parties Act. Under the current electoral law, 225 deputies are elected from lists from the country as a whole, and 225 are elected in single-seat electoral districts. Seats in the State Duma will be distributed among those federal lists that secure at least 7 per cent of the votes cast, up from 5 per cent. In addition to consolidating the place of political parties, the new provisions have the effect of limiting access to the State Duma for small parties and independent candidates. The bills, approved by the upper house (the Council of the Federation) on 11 May 2005, require the President's signature to become law.

SUDAN

On 20 December 2004, the National Assembly amended Article 72 of the Constitution, extending its term of office for up to one year. In January 2005, after two years of negotiation, the Government, traditionally dominated by northern Arabs, and the former rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) agreed to a peace deal that would end the civil war that has been onjooing for over 20 years. This agreement makes provision for the sharing of power and resources between the Muslim north and the south, where the majority of the population is Christian and animist. A 60-seat constitutional commission was established to review a draft Constitution prepared by the Government and the SPLM. A new Government of national unity will be sworn in once the new Constitution is approved by the parliament and the SPLM's General Assembly, as specified in the peace agreement.

UZBEKISTAN

Following the decision to establish a bicameral parliament, approved by the referendum of 27 January 2002, the first election under the new system was held in Uzbekistan on 26 December 2004 (first round) and 9 January 2005 (second round) for the Legislative Chamber (lower house), and from 17 to 20 January 2005 for the Senate (upper house). The parliament (Oliy Majlis), which used to have a single chamber of 250 members, has now been replaced by the lower chamber of 120 members, directly elected for five years, and the upper house with 100 members, who also serve a five-year term. Of the 100 senators, 84 are chosen by the members of local Councils of People's Deputies (six each from 14 districts, including the Republic of Karakalpakstan, 12 provinces and the city of Tashkent), and 16 are eminent citizens appointed by the President.

The rule on the validation of polls was also revised. The previous requirement for a turnout of 50 per cent has been removed, and it is now sufficient to have a 33 per cent turnout in each district to validate an election. Another major change is the adoption of a 30 per cent quota for women candidates to the Legislative Chamber. In the election held in December 2004, 159 out of 500 candidates, or 31.8 per cent, were women, of whom 21 were elected (or 17.5 per cent of the total elected). There is no quota for

the number of female deputies. However, this represents an increase since the last election was held in 1999, in which 18 women were elected out of 250 deputies, or 7.2 per cent.

ZIMBABWE

According to a notice published in the Government Gazette on 14 January 2005, President Robert Mugabe signed into law two controversial electoral reform bills which had been passed by the National Assembly last year: the Electoral Commission Act and the Electoral Act. The former provides for the establishment of a new commission composed of five members to run elections in the country, while the latter creates a new electoral court to deal with electoral disputes.

The main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), has criticized both bills for their failure to ensure the independence of the two bodies, claiming that the new commission will largely be influenced by the President. The Chairman of the Electoral Commission will be appointed by the President, and the other four commissioners will be nominated by a parliamentary committee, which also is dominated by the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party. The ruling party also plans to push for the amendment of the Political Parties (Finance) Act in order to obtain up to 65 per cent of state financial grants. Such a change could drive the MDC, which currently receives 49 per cent of state grants, into a financial crisis, as the government has banned political parties from receiving funds from foreign donors and Zimbabweans overseas.

Apart from the promulgation of the two Acts and the reform regarding state grants, new requirements for the registration of voters were announced in January 2005 in The Herald, the official government gazette. Voters in urban areas will have to present inspection officers with payment slips for water, electricity or other utilities, or present written statements from landlords confirming their tenancy within their constituency. Those in rural areas will have to produce a written confirmation from their ward councillors and traditional chiefs. As the new conditions were published in The Herald only at the last moment before a general election was to take place, it was feared that many citizens would disregard them, thus running the risk of being disenfranchised.

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