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Commission on Human Rights, United Nations
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High-level segment

Statement by Anders B. Johnsson Secretary General, Inter-Parliamentary Union

Mr. President,
Mr. Acting High Commissioner,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to take the floor on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Let me start, Mr President, by congratulating you upon your election to lead this Commission. The President of the IPU, Senator Páez Verdugo, who very much regrets that his obligations in Chile prevent him from being here today, has asked me to convey to you our readiness to work with you and your colleagues on the Bureau during this coming year to develop a parliamentary dimension to the Commission on Human Rights.

Mr. President,

During this past year, we have seen the world spiral almost beyond control with unprecedented levels of violence and disregard for the rule of law, justice and basic human values. Examined from a human rights perspective, the 21st century has certainly got off to a very unpromising start.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union is founded on core values that relate to the dignity of the individual, respect for others and the need to solve differences through dialogue. It is committed to the defence of democracy, promotes democratic values and pleads for respect for the rule of law, both nationally and between States.

The fundamental notion underlying the exercise of democracy is the acceptance - or better still, the respect - of the other. Democratic life involves the right to differ and the acceptance of such difference by all. The point is to recognise difference and allow it to exist rather than refuse it or, as is all too often the case, demonise it in order to suppress it.

Political life is made up of confrontation. This is perfectly normal. The institutional mechanisms for managing public affairs are partly designed to channel conflictive or simply differing currents towards a single project: ensuring the common good. It is thanks to the rules of democracy that political life is not just a shooting gallery but, on the contrary, aims to achieve positive results for the nation as a whole. It is for democratic institutions to mediate tensions and maintain equilibrium between the competing claims in society.

These precepts are as valid in international relations as they are in national affairs. Over the years, the IPU has strongly supported the development of international structures that would allow States to resolve conflicts through dialogue and peaceful means. Recent events point to an urgent need to re-establish respect for the rule of law in international relations. In the view of the IPU, the United Nations is needed more than ever before and it must remain the cornerstone of strong and effective global cooperation.

Mr. President,

Parliament is the State institution that lies at the very heart of human rights. It embodies the fundamental human right of all people to determine their fate and to take part in the management of the public affairs of the nation. It is also uniquely well placed to promote and protect human rights. It is in parliament that human rights treaties are ratified and their provisions converted into domestic law. Often the recommendations of the treaty bodies or under your special procedures require parliamentary debate and action. As part of its oversight function, parliament and its members monitor respect for human rights and curb abuses. It also adopts the national budget and can thus steer funds towards sectors of primary impact for the enjoyment of human rights. And last but not least, members of parliament everywhere are opinion leaders who can do much to raise public awareness and ensure that society is imbued with the values underpinning democracy and human rights.

Parliament is therefore a guardian of human rights and, as such, a natural partner for the United Nations and your Commission in the field of human rights. In recognition of this fact, the IPU has promoted a closer interaction between parliaments and your Commission and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

During these last three days, the IPU – working in close cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme and with the support of the High Commissioner's Office - held a seminar for members of parliament involved in human rights. The seminar brought together some 140 members of parliament who are members of parliamentary human rights committees.

While everyone in parliament and hence also every parliamentary committee should take human rights into account in their work, it is also important for a parliamentary committee to be specially designated to address human rights issues and make sure that human rights are indeed treated as cross-cutting issues in parliament. More than one third of all national parliaments have now done so, and it was representatives of these committees that met here in Geneva.

During the discussions, we examined the very wide variety of human rights structures that exist in parliament, their functions and powers. We reviewed several practical examples of specific action that parliaments can take to promote human rights, and I would like to highlight one example from Brazil. In that country the parliamentary human rights committee launched a campaign for the valorisation of human rights in the media. In a country where 97% of the population watches TV, programmes that incite to violence have the perverse effect of undermining human rights programmes. Together with UNESCO, the committee set up a mechanism that allows the public to lodge complaints which are then raised with the competent authorities, the media and their corporate sponsors and other financing institutions and which can lead to sanctions.

We also debated the role these committees can play in relation to the international structures and here I would like to share an example that was provided by a colleague from South Africa. In her country, national reports to international monitoring bodies first have to go to parliament for debate. Parliament ensures that those reports contain a wide variety of views, including those of civil society. To do so, parliament holds debates and public hearings, calls in ministers and requests documents and reports from a wide range of departments and citizens.

Moreover, in South Africa, members of parliament are included in the national delegation to the international monitoring mechanisms so that they can better understand the recommendations that are subsequently made, and of course the parliament plays an active role in ensuring that these recommendations are also followed up and implemented at the national level.

Of course, at meetings such as this one of parliamentary human rights activists, it is impossible not to talk also about the substance of human rights. Human rights concern everyone. Human rights are not a slogan; they are juridical, ethical and moral principles which apply to everyday life. Defending human rights means defending the human rights of everyone, even those whose ideas one does not share.

We also underscored the importance of ensuring equality between men and women as an essential part of human rights promotion and protection. We recognise that progress has been made, particularly in Rwanda which is the first country ever to reach parity in the lower Chamber of parliament. With the world average barely above 15 percent, however, the level of participation of women in political life is still very disappointing. Clearly we have to do much better, and much sooner.

Human rights education has also run as a red thread through the discussions. Most of us have underscored the need to create a human rights culture, and the way to do that is by ensuring that all education programmes have a clear human rights focus.

I cannot hope to do justice to the rich debate that took place during the three days in this short intervention and the Chairperson's summary is therefore being circulated together my speech.

Mr. President,

I would like to conclude by referring to the many interventions that were made in the course of the seminar on the fight against terrorism. We all agree that terrorism must always be condemned. Terrorism has no religion, no country and no excuse. However, what is equally important is that the fight against terrorism must not result in new human rights violations. The point was eloquently made that lawlessness cannot successfully be fought with further lawlessness. It can only lead to a further spiral of violence.

Of course, the participants join the IPU and indeed the world community in condemning the latest acts of terror. They equally expressed their compassion for all victims of gross human rights violations whether these are perpetrated by terrorist groups or States and wherever they take place, in Africa, America, Asia, Europe or the Middle East.

Mr. President, the Inter-Parliamentary Union stands ready to bring support to this Commission in the hope that it may carry out the noble tasks for which it was originally set up. Thank you.