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**Statement by Anders B. Johnsson,
Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union,
at the United Nations Human Rights Council
Geneva, 13 March 2007**

Mr. President,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Almost nine months have passed since I had the honour of taking the floor to address the inaugural session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Nine months which have been marked by persistent violations of human rights of all sorts, even on a massive scale; violations which are only sometimes reported in the media and which, more often than not, are simply part of the daily reality faced by millions of women, men and children all over the world, far from the glare of cameras and the watchful eye of reporters; violations which are even so commonplace that many people do not even recognize them as abuses of human rights.

This situation poses a huge challenge to the international community and, in particular the countries that have been elected to sit on the Human Rights Council and have thus a particular responsibility to uphold human rights. How should they and the Council discharge this responsibility? As you seek to answer that question, I would like to encourage you to keep these victims in mind since your work will only have any sense if it makes a difference to their lives.

Mr. President,

The fundamental notion underlying the exercise of democracy is the acceptance - or better still, the respect - of the other. Democratic life means both 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 in politics, 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 the single objective of 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 results that are beneficial for society as a whole. Democratic institutions exist to mediate tensions and maintain equilibrium between competing claims.

Freedom of speech and expression are key to this exercise. I might disagree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it, declared Voltaire, no doubt addressing one of the Vikings of his time.

These are fundamental tenets that underpin the purpose and functioning of national democratic institutions such as parliaments. They are equally valid for international institutions, including your Council.

May I suggest that you draw inspiration from the highest standards of democracy and human rights as you finalize your own methods of work. Last year the IPU issued a guide to good practice entitled *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century*. The publication is the fruit of a joint endeavour by some seventy parliaments which set out to define what we commonly mean by a democratic parliament. The guide identifies five key characteristics of any parliament worth its salt.. It should be representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective. You would do well to seek to ensure that your Council meet these standards.

Mr. President,

In my last intervention I recalled the particular responsibility that Parliaments have in the field of human rights which include ratifying human rights treaties and converting their provisions into domestic law. Recommendations issued by the treaty bodies or under your special procedures often require parliamentary debate and action. Parliament adopts the national budget and can steer funds towards areas that are crucial to the enjoyment of human rights. Members of parliament 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. Parliaments and their members are therefore crucial to guaranteeing human rights and curbing abuses.

The IPU has worked closely with parliaments on human rights issues for many years. We have a well-established mechanism for addressing human rights violations affecting individual parliamentarians. We convene annual meetings of parliamentary human rights committees to examine specific human rights issues and we were pleased to receive you, Mr. President, at our meeting last year. The members of these parliamentary committees greatly welcomed the opportunity to exchange views with you and to learn about the work to be undertaken by the Council.

The IPU also runs a capacity building programme for parliaments in the field of human rights and we are grateful for the grant just given to us by the United Nations Democracy Fund to promote knowledge in parliament of the international human rights machinery. We look forward to carrying out this task in close consultation with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Over the years, the IPU and national parliaments have come to value highly the work carried out under your special procedures. We work very closely with several of the rapporteurs and their reports provide important guidance to parliaments all over the world on how best to implement existing human rights standards and advance human rights protection for all.

We are aware of the debate that surrounds some of these mechanisms and particularly those that are country specific. The human rights work of the IPU, in particular its Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, has shown that both thematic and country specific mechanisms are of enormous value and should be continued. The important question is therefore not if they should be maintained but rather which countries should be the subject of specific attention and on the basis of which criteria . Don't throw out the baby with the bath water.

Mr. President,

Let me conclude my intervention by reiterating the invitation I extended to the Council last year to join the IPU in thinking outside the box and, together, conceive of a parliamentary dimension to the work of your Council. I made seven proposals that could form a basis for such work but let me just take up two of them today.

I believe that providing parliamentary input to a universal periodic review mechanism is a practical measure that could easily be put in place and could generate enormous benefit to the work of this Council. It would raise awareness within parliaments of international norms and commitments and help galvanize greater political support for action; it would assist in ensuring implementation and enforcement of relevant human rights legislation; and it would serve to build a healthy working relationship between relevant national institutions and therefore also contribute in no small measure to good governance.

Similarly, I would urge this Council to avail itself fully of the huge reservoir of expertise and political will that exists in our organization and in parliaments to promote gender equality and combat human rights violations against women. These are urgent issues that deserve the attention of the international community, not just on the 8th of March but every day of the year. Women and societies everywhere and the development of your countries stand to gain enormously if you take these issues seriously.

The IPU would be keen to sit down with members of this Council to explore how best to pursue these or other suggestions you may have for ensuring better parliamentary interaction with your Council. I believe you have a firm mandate to do so from the United Nations General Assembly which late last year adopted a resolution on cooperation between the United Nations and the IPU which encourages us to strengthen further our contribution and, I quote, "in relation to the newly established bodies such as the Human Rights Council".

Mr. President,

I am convinced that the voice of the legislative branch of state should be heard in the deliberations of this body. The IPU remains committed to lending its assistance to the challenging endeavour you have before you.

Thank you.