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Ministerial Meeting

Statement by Ambassador Anda Filip
Permanent Observer

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Mr. Chairman,

I am pleased to participate today in the Ministerial Meeting of the International Conference of New or Restored Democracies and to address the theme of greater integration between the three components of the ICNRD. Please allow me to begin by commending the efforts of the State of Qatar over these past three years, in ensuring a substantive follow-up to the recommendations of a very successful ICNRD Conference in Doha in 2006.

When we last met in this format at the United Nations in December 2007, I had the opportunity of sharing some views on how, we believed, the ICNRD movement could further enhance its efficiency and effectiveness. Those ideas did not emanate solely from the IPU, but rather they were the result of a brainstorming session that had taken place a few months earlier in Stockholm, Sweden, with the participation of the main ICNRD partners: the ICNRD host countries, the United Nations, parliamentarians, academics and civil society. I do not wish to repeat all of those points, but there are a few recommendations that we feel are still particularly relevant in the context of our discussion today.

One is that the NRD movement draws strength from the constructive engagement of partners and its inclusive approach. It serves as a valuable forum for exchanging experiences, good practices and expertise. It is at its best when it can act as a catalyst and stimulate action by others. From this perspective, it can also provide a significant opportunity for cross-fertilization among the three components of the movement.

Let me give you an example: in 2007, at the initiative of the Qatari Chairmanship of the ICNRD, the General Assembly adopted a consensus resolution which, among other things, designated September 15th as the International Day of Democracy. Governments, parliaments and civil society alike have embraced this day with great enthusiasm, as an opportunity for reflection and review of progress, setbacks and challenges to the democratic process. We have seen the response of our own member parliaments and we feel that this International Day provides an excellent vehicle to keep democracy present on the agenda of parliament throughout the year.

As you may have seen, the IPU this year commissioned a global public opinion survey on political tolerance. The results of that survey, with its indication of some problematic areas that will need to be addressed with greater focus – the freedom of political expression, the role of the opposition, certain abuses of the parliamentary mandate, the representation of minority and indigenous groups in political life – all of these will be mainstreamed in the IPU agenda of work for the months and years ahead. It will have an impact, we trust, at the level of national parliaments, but also of the other stakeholders active on the democracy front.

A second point is that the NRD should be a continuous process. There is a clear need to plan for and carry out work in between the conferences. From this perspective, a small ICNRD secretariat based in New York and with a mission to engage with and bring together all the ICNRD partners on a regular basis could be very effective. On the occasion of the Sixth ICNRD in Doha, each of the stakeholder meetings issued a Plan of Action – by Governments, Parliaments and Civil Society – to further promote democracy nationally and internationally. All those who have signed on to these commitments should also be held to account, and there is value in an annual review of progress not just by the ICNRD Chair, but by all members, in meeting these commitments.

An ICNRD Secretariat could hence assist with setting up a reporting exercise whereby States (with the participation and input from the three components) provide information on steps they have put in place or policies they pursue to uphold commitments already made in the context of the ICNRD process or more generally as part of State compliance with international human rights norms. Alternatively, a mechanism could be set up whereby a team of experts draft brief country papers describing national democracy policies and plans by drawing on existing sources of information.

Last but not least, such a Secretariat could assist the ICNRD and its members in better tapping into the wealth of information and practice already carried out by various actors in the democracy field, and bringing it all together in the form of a single clearinghouse or database to be accessed by all.

Deriving from this is a third point, namely that perhaps we should not be talking about greater integration *per se* among the three components of the NRD movement, but rather about a better mechanism for regular dialogue, exchange and joint action. The three components of the NRD movement represent three very distinct constituencies, and we believe they all care deeply about checks and balances and the separation of powers. What is important – particularly within such an exercise with the one main goal of advancing the basic principles and values of democracy – is that they come together and interact as equal partners.

I think we should be honest here and recognize, for example, that civil society, through its various forms and manifestations, has been a main engine driving democratic change and transformation within societies. The political establishment in many countries, governments and parliaments alike, could do much more and would have much to gain by opening up more and really engaging with civil society and the various NGOs.

In terms of better cooperation between the three components at the main ICNRD conferences, this could mean more interaction between them with a possibility for all to have access to all public meetings, possibility for representatives of the different components to be represented at sessions of the drafting committees of the other components and with a joint statement to be issued by the three components. The continued involvement of parliamentary and civil society representatives in the ICNRD Council and Advisory Board is also highly advisable.

In the inter-sessional period as well, the NRD movement would have much to gain from some serious discussions, among the three components, on the major challenges facing societies today in delivering on the democratic expectations of the citizens. When the results of the public opinion Survey on political tolerance were released just a couple of weeks ago, IPU President Theo-Ben Gurirab issued a statement in which he drew attention, with grave concern, to “the gulf that separates public aspirations for democratic governance and vigorous public debate, and the widely-held perception of political life as a closed space where there is little room for dissent and real consideration of alternative policy options”. He went on to formulate a series of policy recommendations – addressed to political leaders from around the world – which may very well be relevant to the other members of the NRD movement and which may warrant a more in-depth analysis within the NRD movement itself.

In the interest of time, I will end my brief remarks here, but not without first reiterating the commitment of the IPU and its member parliaments to continue to support and substantively contribute to the work of the NRD movement.

Thank you for your attention.