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**Statement by the IPU President, Mr. Abdelwahad Radi,
at the Special Session of UNCTAD XIII
Doha (Qatar), 22 April 2012**

Mr. Secretary-General of UNCTAD,
Mr. President of the United Nations General Assembly,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address you on behalf of the global parliamentary community and its organization, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which brings together over 160 member parliaments.

Some 46,000 men and women currently hold seats in national legislative institutions around the world. This is a sizable force. These thousands of men and women politicians have a constitutional duty to enact laws, hold government to account, adopt budgets and review public policies and accounts.

UNCTAD has traditionally been receptive to parliamentarians. The IPU, for its part, supports UNCTAD, which plays a vital role as a distinctive knowledge-based UN institution promoting development-led globalization.

We share the view that the international community stands to benefit from a strengthened UNCTAD equipped to play a more forceful role in global economic governance.

The IPU is convinced that the complex edifice of development will be excessively fragile if it is not solidly grounded in democracy. Just as the two pillars of UNCTAD's mandate - trade and development - are closely intertwined, development and democracy form two sides of the same coin.

At the recent statutory IPU Assembly in Kampala, our members discussed in depth the lessons to be learnt from the events in the Middle East and North Africa commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring".

First and foremost, the Arab Spring taught us lessons about democracy, freedom and good governance. However, it also told us something about economic and social policy strategies, risks and vulnerabilities.

For the IPU, good governance means staying on course to achieve sustainable economic, social and institutional development while promoting a healthy balance between the State, civil society and the market economy.

Good governance is based on the rule of law, on efficient and accountable institutions that serve the interests of the people. It implies the existence of political, judicial, administrative, economic and corporate rules that promote development, protect human rights and ensure that people are free to participate in the decisions affecting their lives.

Clearly, these principles were too often disregarded by the public authorities in Arab Spring countries. For decades, wealth was concentrated in the hands of the autocrats in power. Corruption prevailed. Spiraling food prices, growing unemployment, acute problems with education, health care and social protection became powerful catalysts for the uprisings that started when people simply refused to accept the status quo.

So, my first point is that people's concerns should be always at the centre of decisions by policymakers. This is our message to UNCTAD delegates as well.

For parliamentarians, the entry point to development issues is democracy, which must always be constructed. We believe it is vitally important to ensure that all people, including the poor and minorities, are fairly represented in decision-making and that the political process as a whole is open and transparent.

We also believe that the existence of a freely and fairly elected parliament that is fully enabled to exercise its legislative, budgetary and oversight functions is a necessary condition for development.

At heart, parliamentarians are first of all politicians. Their views may span the full political spectrum from left to right, but they express the core concerns of their electorate. Not only must members of parliament address these concerns, they want to be seen and understood to be doing so.

This works well enough in many countries. But it is also a fact – for all the rhetoric about democracy – that in many others parliament has not been given the place and the means to fulfill its functions. Even “mature” democracies may suffer from a democratic deficit with regard to economic oversight and governance, as the eurozone crisis has plainly illustrated.

This was all the more the case in Arab Spring countries. Events there have shown what is bound to happen when parliaments do not call governments to task for growing social and economic inequities and for failing to deliver on the development aspirations of peoples.

My second point relates to transparency and accountability. Parliaments in all countries have the obligation to ensure that both prevail. Yet, clearly, both are lacking.

It is a fact, for example, that many parliaments are not consulted by the executive or the international donors and lending institutions when it comes to development policy. More often than not, poverty reduction strategies are not debated in parliament. Official development assistance is not vetted in parliament and not reflected in the national budget.

There are many of us who are trying to change this situation. A growing number of parliaments in developing countries are working to secure national ownership of development policies and government accountability for ODA.

From a parliamentary perspective, reforming aid to make it more effective is a way of unlocking other factors that will bring about greater national control of development planning, transparency and accountability.

While not the most important funding flow in terms of volume, ODA remains key to the entire development agenda. This is even more true today, for the financial crisis has dried up the capital flows that many developing countries once attracted. The IPU is of the view that ODA should not be cut back under any scenario.

I make this point also in order to highlight the need for UNCTAD to take a stand in favour of involving parliaments in establishing and reviewing national economic, financial and development policies. Some steps have already been made in this direction, but there is much more to do.

For example, it should be possible to define a clear role for parliaments with regard to responsible lending and borrowing principles in order to promote debt manageability. We know that UNCTAD is working on a draft of such principles. When finalizing the draft, it would be important to place due emphasis on the parliamentary dimension of the process.

My third point relates to policymaking at the level of international financial institutions. For many years, members of parliament have been criticizing Bretton Woods institutions as being not particularly democratic. The situation has now started to change.

We are pleased with some of the measures taken to improve governance and transparency at the World Bank and the IMF. It is encouraging to see practical steps being taken to increase the quotas of developing countries on the boards of governors. We have noted the comprehensive information disclosure policy adopted by the Bank. We are aware that reformed conditionality is taking root at the IMF. We appreciate other positive signs, including improved gender balance at top echelons of the two institutions.

While acknowledging all this, parliamentarians remain concerned with the pace and depth of these reforms. This is in part because of a persistent disconnect between national parliaments and the Bretton Woods institutions.

It is for this reason that the recently adopted IPU Strategy for the next five years places special emphasis on the need to bridge this divide internationally and at the country level.

In this context, I should like to mention a global survey conducted by the IPU in cooperation with the World Bank and the IMF on the subject of parliamentary oversight of loan agreements and related processes. Preliminary findings show that legal frameworks for parliamentary oversight of Bank and Fund borrowing are common but far from being universal. Even when they are in place, they have loopholes. Oversight practices are weak. Parliaments lack legal authority to request amendments, and so forth.

These findings may sound downbeat, but the survey has had a positive result because we now have a shared vision of the problems and shortcomings. This holds the promise of a fresh start that could lead to broader cooperation in the future.

For another telling example of how parliaments can bring about transparency and accountability of international institutions, no need to look any further than the ten-year process known as the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO.

Driven by both the IPU and the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Conference has helped enhance WTO's external transparency and facilitated better understanding by parliamentarians of the intricacies of the Doha Round negotiations.

The Parliamentary Conference on the WTO is held annually. It serves as a platform for direct dialogue between parliamentarians and leading WTO negotiators. The most recent session took place for the first time on the premises of the WTO in Geneva.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that, as a result, members of parliament are no longer strangers to WTO headquarters in Geneva. Indeed, they have become welcome guests there, playing their inherent role as a stakeholder in the process.

Examples of this nature are many. We hope they can serve as an inspiration for UNCTAD delegates as well.

For its part, the IPU undertakes to submit the outcome of UNCTAD XIII to every parliament in the world for debate and scrutiny in the best parliamentary tradition.

We wish you every success in your deliberations.

Thank you for your attention.