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REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

(a) REGIONAL MEETING FOR TWELVE PLUS PARLIAMENTS ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

(London, 27 and 28 April 2009)

1. The Parliament of the United Kingdom, in cooperation with the IPU, organized a regional seminar on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It took place on 27 and 28 April on the parliamentary premises in London and brought together experts and members of parliament from 11 European countries. Its objective was to draw the attention of European parliaments to the Convention. While closing a long chapter in the fight against the exclusion and marginalization of disabled people, the adoption of the Convention by the UN General Assembly in December 2006 opened a new one: the challenge is now to translate the Convention into reality.

2. The seminar was opened by the Speaker of the House of Commons and the IPU Secretary General, who both insisted on the crucial role parliaments will have to play to ensure that the Convention makes a real difference in the lives of disabled people. In the ensuing debate, experts and participants agreed that the Convention was a big step forward as it departs from considering disabled people as objects of charity and medical care, but clearly states that they, like everyone else, are right holders. The discussions focused on a number of key articles of the Convention, in particular those concerning accessibility, including to new information technologies, universal design, recognition of legal capacity and the non-definition of disability. Participants insisted on the essential role of civil society. In this context, the representatives of disability organizations made it clear that States should involve disabled people and their organizations in all decision-making processes concerning them. Several participants, who were themselves disabled persons, said that the Convention and the process leading up to its adoption had already led to a change in societal attitudes towards disabled persons. Language was also considered important in this context: rather than insisting on the disability, society should look at the "abilities" of persons with a disability.

3. The question of representation of persons with disabilities in parliaments was of course also raised and the example of Uganda was mentioned in this respect, where four seats are reserved for persons with disabilities, who are elected by disability organizations. Their representation in parliament has raised the status of persons with disabilities in Uganda and it was mentioned in this regard that representation in parliament led to a necessary shift in the power balance.

4. Many European States still need to ratify the Convention - 12 have so far, and some of them with reservations. Participants called on European States which had not yet done so to ratify the Convention as quickly as possible and to abstain from making reservations. The United Kingdom, which at the time of the seminar had not yet ratified the Convention, ratified it on 8 June this year.