



123rd ASSEMBLY OF THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION AND RELATED MEETINGS

Geneva, 4-6.10.2010

Governing Council
Item 11

CL/187/11(e)-R.1
30 August 2010

**(e) PARLIAMENTARY MEETING ON THE OCCASION OF THE THIRD FORUM OF THE
UNITED NATIONS ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS**

(Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 27-29 May 2010)

Over 6,000 participants, including political and corporate leaders, civil society activists, youth representatives, journalists, international organizations, and religious leaders met in Rio de Janeiro at the end of May for the Third Annual Forum of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (AoC).

Established in 2005 as a UN initiative, the Alliance emerged out of the conviction that, in order to achieve sustainable peace, long-standing divisions between cultures need to be addressed. As a result, the Alliance seeks to mobilize concerted action towards enhancing mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious backgrounds. It aims to bridge the world's divides and build trust and understanding across cultures and communities worldwide.

The global scope and universal outreach of the Alliance were further reinforced by its growing membership, with over 120 nations and international organizations currently members of the AoC Group of Friends. It was the first time the AoC annual Forum – after previous meetings held in Madrid and Istanbul - was convened outside the Mediterranean region, on another continent.

Also for the first time, legislators were encouraged to join their national delegations to the Rio Forum, and to play a proactive role throughout the proceedings of this major international event. A parliamentary meeting was organized by the IPU and the Brazilian Parliament on the first day of the Forum, focusing on *The role of legislators in promoting intercultural dialogue and cooperation*.

The meeting, attended by MPs from some 20 countries and three regional parliamentary organizations, was chaired by the Speaker of the Brazilian Parliament, Mr. Michel Temer, with a keynote address by UNAoC High Representative Jorge Sampaio. It provided an opportunity to review progress in implementation of the resolution adopted by the 116th IPU Assembly held in Bali in 2007 on peaceful co-existence and mutual respect among religious communities in a globalized world, and examined how parliaments could more actively pursue the objectives of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The participants showcased their national experiences and good practices, and made a series of practical proposals on how to help bridge cultures and promote effective dialogue among the diverse communities within society. These include the need to specifically place issues related to cultural diversity on the domestic political agenda, invest in education, encourage participation by minorities in political life by gaining access to parliament and being able to actively influence the work of parliament, make better use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) and hence modernize parliamentary processes to increase transparency and accountability of the political process.

During the meeting, legislators invited the participation of and engaged with other stakeholders in the Rio Forum, including government officials, academics and youth representatives. The youth contribution, in particular, was very well received, which helped underscore the type of support and active engagement that youth organizations can and should bring to national campaigns aimed at combating extremism and intolerance.

During the main programme of the Forum, the IPU also organized the first thematic session devoted to democracy, good governance and cultural diversity. This session allowed participants to explore the nexus between democracy and diversity, as well as the modalities aimed at promoting the effective participation of ethnic minorities and indigenous groups in public life. The thematic session was moderated by Mexican Senator and IPU Vice-President Mr A.A. Díaz Caneja, and featured prominent international personalities such as the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Mr. M. Çavusoglu; former Norwegian Prime Minister Mr. K.M. Bondevik; and the Minister of Culture of Brazil and President of LatinoBarómetro, Ms. M. Lagos.

The discussants agreed that peace and democracy need to be founded on the rule of law, freedom of expression and respect for the plurality of views. Political tolerance is an essential ingredient in this equation; however - as a global opinion poll recently commissioned by the IPU has shown - citizens around the world feel that such tolerance is seriously lacking. It is up to the politicians themselves to continuously strive to foster political tolerance through education, dialogue and understanding, and, most importantly, by upholding the highest standards of ethics in public life.

Democracy draws its strength from diversity, as well as from the acceptance of and respect for basic human rights, minorities, and individual liberties. A prerequisite of democracy is a public space where citizens can express themselves freely and without fear. Trust in institutions, dialogue within the diverse sectors of society and political tolerance were highlighted as key components of good governance in a context of cultural diversity.

The participants in the thematic session stressed that civil society and religious organizations were called upon to play a major role in overcoming cultural divides and religious intolerance. As past experience had shown, for example, interreligious councils with a regular and ongoing programme of consultations and discussion can help defuse tensions and dispel misconceptions. Authorities also need to facilitate and promote the effective participation of ethnic and cultural minorities in public life. Political parties have a particular responsibility to ensure gender equality and the political representation of minorities.

Lastly, the point was made that politicians also need to invest in youth: ensure education for all, offer a space for youth to express themselves in public life, and facilitate exchanges among youth of different cultural and religious backgrounds. One concrete proposal referred to the establishment of youth political shadow systems, to advise government officials by providing their own unique insight and suggestions on major political, economic and social issues facing society.

A prominent feature of the Rio Forum was the strong and enthusiastic participation of youth representatives from all over the world, which underscored once again that investing in youth is the best investment any parent, community and country can possibly make. A very promising innovative solution awarded at this year's edition of the Marketplace of Ideas was that of **ParliaMentors** - a pioneering initiative of the Three Faiths Forum, designed to nurture the next generation of politicians and community leaders, while seeking to bring about social change today. The programme gives trios (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) of students in the United Kingdom the opportunity to be mentored by parliamentarians. Together they create and deliver "empowerment projects" aimed at increasing political participation and social responsibility. It is a type of innovative solution that can be replicated, with support from national parliaments, in many other countries and regions of the world.

The 2011 Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations will be held in Qatar, a country with which the IPU has worked closely in the context of the International Conference of New or Restored Democracies (2006-2010). The IPU may wish to further explore modalities to enhance its cooperation with the United Nations AoC.