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THE RESPECTIVE ROLES OF PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA IN PROVIDING THE PUBLIC WITH OBJECTIVE INFORMATION, ESPECIALLY ON ARMED CONFLICTS AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST TERRORISM

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Terrorism and armed conflict are two grave challenges threatening the global community today. By endangering the security of nations and jeopardizing the national development process, both terrorism and armed conflict undermine the very roots of civilized democratic societies. Terrorism and armed conflict are by their very nature anti-democratic, and involve no interest in generating consensus-building debates to resolve contentious issues. The onus, therefore, falls on parliaments and the media, two strong pillars of democracy, to help proactively in rooting out the evils of terrorism and armed conflict and to strengthen the democratic process.

An informed citizenry is a major prerequisite for a successful democracy. The lack of authentic and objective information often tends to generate and spread baseless rumours which can bolster the hold of forces inimical to a successful parliamentary system. It thus becomes the responsibility of both the parliament and the media to help generate objective information, in particular in respect of crisis situations such as those that result from terrorism and armed conflict which threaten civilized society.

In these trying circumstances, it is natural for governments, parliaments, the media and societies to feel the need to formulate positions on how to provide objective information on incidents of armed conflict and terrorism without either conceding an advantage to the perpetrators of terrorist or criminal acts or impinging on the right of the public to access information.

2.   EFFORTS TO COMBAT TERRORISM

United Nations General Assembly resolution 49/60 on measures to eliminate international terrorism, adopted in 1994, underlined the growing international consensus on preventing and combating terrorism. Today, there is a greater recognition and willingness on the part of the international community to confront the menace of terrorism. This was evident in the debate in the United Nations General Assembly of October 2001, when an unprecedented number of leaders condemned all forms of terrorism and committed their countries to take all necessary measures, both domestically and at the international level, to root out terrorism. Several concrete steps have also been taken, the most notable among these being the adoption of United Nations Security Council resolution 1373 (2001) on

28 September 2001, which made it obligatory for all States to take comprehensive measures to combat terrorism, and particularly the financing of terrorism.   The United Nations Security Council adopted another text, resolution 1377 (2001), on 12 November 2001, and expressed its determination to proceed with the implementation of resolution 1373 (2001) in full cooperation with the whole membership of the United Nations, urging all States to take urgent steps to fully implement that resolution and to assist each other in doing so.   The United Nations Security Council has since adopted a number of important resolutions relating to terrorism, the adoption of resolution 1566 (2004) being one of the most recent significant measures aimed at combating terrorism.

It is clear now that efforts geared towards combating this new type of pandemic which terrorism represents for humanity must be global, and must involve the entire international community bound together by common values and aspirations.   Indeed, given that terrorism has no boundaries and has used the very tenets of globalization to its own advantage, the strategy for combating terrorism must also be a global one, involving government, parliament and civil society, which must all unite in concerted action.   One of the most delicate tasks in this respect concerns information, which terrorists may manipulate and use to influence thinking and advance their so-called "cause".

While the nations of the world must combat terrorism with a single-minded focus, there is also a need to address the issues which lead to an environment conducive to terrorism.

3.   EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE OF ARMED CONFLICT

The gravity of the ill effects of armed conflicts on the common man has been widely recognized for a long time.   The Geneva Conventions for the protection of victims of war of 1949 stress that persons taking no active part in hostilities, and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, must in all circumstances be treated humanely.

United Nations Security Council resolution 1366 (2001) calls upon the Member States as well as regional and subregional organisations and arrangements to support the development of a comprehensive conflict prevention strategy as proposed by the United Nations Secretary-General.   It also stresses the need to create the conditions for durable peace and sustainable development by addressing the root causes of armed conflict, and to this end calls upon Member States and relevant bodies of the United Nations system to contribute to the effective implementation of the United Nations Declaration and Programme of Action for a Culture of Peace.

In July 2003, the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution on the prevention of armed conflict.   The adoption of this resolution represented a significant development in the policies of the Member States towards the full recognition of the value of early warning and prevention of armed conflicts.   The resolution further emphasized that the prevention of armed conflict would be promoted by continued cooperation among Member States, the United Nations system, the Bretton Woods institutions and regional and sub-regional organisations, noting that the private sector and civil society have a supporting role to play.

4.   REPORTING ON INCIDENTS OF ARMED CONFLICT AND TERRORISM

In democratic systems, the media generally pursues freedom to cover events and issues with only reasonable restraints. It is, however, generally recognized that in addition to the legal rights and obligations set forth in the relevant legal norms, the media has an ethical responsibility to citizens and society at a time when information and communication play an important role in the formation of their personal attitudes and the development of society and democratic life.

The increase in instances, scope and extent of terrorism has coincided with the exponential spread and sophistication of the media as a means of communicating information to people all over the world. It is, therefore, natural that both the instigators of terrorist acts and armed conflict and the governments concerned will seek to gain the attention of the media to get their point of view across. This becomes particularly relevant in the case of the private media that is not under direct government control. On the other hand, the media and governments, with the assistance of parliaments, have a common interest in seeing to it that the media does not fall prey to promoting the cause of terrorism or its methods. Moreover, neither the media nor policymakers want to see terrorism or counter-terrorism eroding constitutional freedoms, including freedom of the press.

5.   ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS AND GOVERNMENTS

Parliamentarians are accountable to the people and, as such, they need to convey objective positions on terrorism or armed conflict based on their assessments. On the other hand, parliaments as institutions also have a role in projecting a responsible message, one that is in conformity with generally acceptable positions on the issues in the country concerned, but more importantly one that assesses situations in the light of the relevant resolutions of the United Nations and the IPU. Parliaments as legislative authorities also play a major role in determining the parameters within which a free press and media should operate in their coverage of information relating to terrorism and armed conflict.

One of the primary roles and responsibilities of parliaments, as the legitimate embodiment of the popular will, is to support understanding among the people and to promote international peace and security. Parliaments can accomplish this primary task only if they respect public opinion and if they have appropriate powers and instruments to achieve their goals. Parliaments cannot be successful in their activities of serving the cause of peace without the day-to-day cooperation of the press and the news and information services of the electronic media.

Parliaments, as elected bodies, have their own specific role in this regard. Parliaments can influence government bodies to provide more information relevant to the subject, and at the same time can help the media show responsibility in reporting events.

It is advisable that parliaments keep a close watch on events related to armed conflict or terrorist activities. In this respect, parliamentary committees – both standing and ad hoc committees – can play a very important role. Parliamentary committees help to keep government policies in conformity with not only the short-term interests of the government, but also with the long-term interests of society as a whole.

As the representatives of the people, parliamentarians have a very important role to play in peace-building and conflict resolution. This can be achieved, inter alia, by:

- Facilitating communication among their constituents and within their communities;

- Disseminating information about the issues and keeping up the morale of the people;

- Reassuring the public, as they are the perfect conduit for information and reassurance; and

- Influencing the government responses in a positive manner by introducing laws and adopting policies and budgets to help their countries adopt better education and preventive health-care policies.

Governments need public understanding, cooperation and restraint in their efforts to limit the harm caused by terrorism to society and in their efforts to punish or apprehend those responsible for terrorist acts. One option would be to encourage the media to establish a loose voluntary code of conduct or guidelines that editors and reporters could access for guidance. Parliaments could also urge their governments to call a special media conference, national or perhaps international in scope, for senior network and print media executives to develop voluntary guidelines for reporting on terrorism. Even if specific guidelines were not adopted, such conferences would increase understanding in the public policy and press policy communities of the needs of their respective institutions.

Further, national meetings can be conducted under the auspices of a government agency to discuss subjects drawn from the practices of some important media agencies and to consider guidelines, including on reasonable restrictions such as:

- Limiting the dissemination of information on hostages which may prove harmful to them, such as information on the number, nationality, official positions, and influence of the persons taken hostage;

- Limiting information on military or police movements during rescue operations;

- Limiting, or agreeing not to air, live unedited interviews with terrorists;

- Checking sources of information carefully, as well as avoiding unfounded speculation; and

- Exercising due care, caution and diligence in handling information that may cause widespread panic or exacerbate events which by stirring emotions aid terrorists.

6.   ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The legislative activities of parliaments are influenced by public opinion, which is partially generated by the media. The media, like society in general, is diverse, both politically and professionally. With respect to politics, it can be pro-government, pro-opposition, or neutral. This diversity has a certain influence upon the attitude of the media towards facts. At the same time, certain media institutions, such as public radio and television stations, national broadcasting institutions, and national and international news agencies, have special roles and

responsibilities in the best sense of public service, namely informing the public objectively about events and trends, without regard to individual business interests and the interests of any other pressure groups .

The media plays an especially important role in reporting events and trends leading up to an armed conflict, and also later during the process and the settlement of the conflict. Through the reporting of international television news stations, armed conflicts, by the end of the twentieth century, had become "televised events" that could be followed from minute to minute all over the world. The live pictures people can see from the scene of an armed conflict or of certain "measures" taken in the struggle against terrorism have a much deeper impact upon the way of thinking of the public than any other source of information that was previously available. The role of the media is of critical importance in the struggle against terrorism, especially in promoting an unbiased description of the causes, actors and consequences of terrorist acts. Parliaments have their own roles and responsibilities in monitoring this function of the media.

Government officials who are responsible for a country's relations with a region affected by an armed conflict are often faced with the need to ease anxiety in the public. Similarly, those who are in charge of leading the struggle against terrorism are also responsible for avoiding panic. Their approach may be very restrictive when the media requests information, and this highly restrictive approach may lead to an opposing trend in the media: the hunt for stories of great concern, sometimes through security leaks that produce reports that may be founded or unfounded.

Media organizations can play an important role in creating closer cooperation between parliaments and the media. The IPU should consider inviting representatives of major media organizations as observers to important conferences which have a bearing on the media.

In the context of the points discussed above, it becomes obvious that the media can be an effective instrument in combating terrorism and also in conflict resolution by presenting before the people reliable and authentic information with respect for human rights and with a diversity of views. It is the duty of the media to present before the people an objective picture of any crisis situation. An important aspect of coverage by journalists of dangerous assignments is that they risk their lives while covering incidents of terrorism and armed conflict. Their safety is not always guaranteed even if international law provides them with adequate protection on paper. According to Reporters Without Borders, in 2004 as many as 53 journalists were killed and many more were captured; as of January 2005 at least 107 journalists still remained imprisoned. The safety, security and human rights of journalists and media personnel covering conflicts and situations involving terrorism have thus assumed added importance.

While it is true that journalism must be fair and accurate in reporting the facts, it must also be remembered that in a society riddled with conflict, the media can provide a forum in which to search for alternatives to armed conflict and for its settlement by peaceful means; the press may be guided by a firm and committed desire for peace and democratic governance. Journalists are required to observe restraint and caution when reporting on crisis situations, without of course compromising their freedom of opinion and expression. They must recognize that virtually every report regarding conflict has potential consequences for the conflict itself. At times, explicit reporting of certain events might give rise to further widespread unrest. In such situations, it becomes the bounden duty of the media to report the news and to facilitate the generation of a public opinion and an atmosphere that are conducive to peace.

The media must put the conflict in historical and social perspective, deepening everyone's understanding of it. If the media churns out propaganda material and biased information, it will negatively counter attempts at peace-building. More thought provoking editorials and articles in the print media and purposeful discussions in the electronic media can be helpful in dealing with situations of armed conflict and terrorism.

The media can play a significant role in spreading a culture of peace and non-violence, promoting tolerance, friendship, dialogue and respect for the opinions of others.

7.   ROLE OF THE IPU

The IPU has time and again expressed deep concern over the brutal effect of terrorism in today's world as well as its conviction that no cause can justify such abhorrent crimes. It has strongly condemned all acts, methods and practices of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, wherever and by whomsoever committed, including those in which States are directly or indirectly involved, which threaten friendly relations among peoples, endanger or take innocent lives, which have a deleterious effect on international relations and which may jeopardize the security and territorial integrity of States.

The IPU has also endorsed a number of United Nations Security Council resolutions, including resolution 1368 (2001), which calls upon all States to prevent and suppress terrorist attacks by means of increased cooperation and full implementation of the relevant international and anti-terrorist conventions, and resolution 1373 (2001), which calls upon all States to adopt anti-terrorist measures in the fields of finance, criminal law and information technology, and to refrain from providing active or passive support to terrorists. In order to further assert their position on the issue of terrorism, the Members of the IPU who have not already done so may consider taking into account United Nations Security Council resolution 1566 (2004) on threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts, which was adopted unanimously.

In its campaign to secure global peace and security, the IPU at its 99th Conference, held in Windhoek, adopted a resolution noting the importance of promoting all the components of a genuine "culture of peace", and hoping for full recognition of the right to peace, which is inherent in every individual and every society and is the very foundation of such a culture. It further called upon the United Nations and other international and regional organizations concerned to develop and implement an international system for preventing aggression by tackling the root causes of problems, and urged these organizations to proceed accordingly with an in-depth review of the conditions to be met and the means to be applied to ensure that conflict prevention would be more effective than in the past.

It is worth recalling that the IPU has strongly advised all Member Parliaments to assume, in conformity with their national legislation and the international obligations of States, the responsibility for implementing and enforcing, through the enactment of national laws, the international agreements that have been concluded to punish and prevent war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and terrorism.

Just as the IPU urges its Member Parliaments which have not already done so to endow their national legislations with powerful instruments aimed at preventing and combating terrorism in transnational financial operations, and combat money laundering and organized crime which often fuel terrorism, particular attention must also be paid to international

cooperation, specifically judicial cooperation and information exchange among countries, organizations and agencies with similar goals.

8.   CONCLUSION

Terrorists, governments, parliaments and the media see the function, roles and responsibilities of the media when it covers terrorist acts from differing and often competing perspectives. The challenge to Parliaments and media communities is to understand the dynamics of terrorist activities and to develop policy options designed to serve the interests of the government, the media, and society at large. It is essential to understand the motivations behind both governments' and terrorists' use of the media before a clear view is taken on the role of parliaments and the media in providing objective information to the public. Terrorists need publicity if they are to gain attention, instil fear, inspire respect, and secure favourable understanding of their cause, if not their act. Terrorists want the press to give legitimacy to what is often portrayed as ideological or personality feuds or divisions between armed groups and political wings. They want the media to amplify panic, to spread fear, to facilitate economic loss (for example by scaring off investment and tourism), to make populations lose faith in their governments' ability to protect them, and to trigger government and popular overreaction both to specific incidents and to the overall threat of terrorism.

At a policy level, both parliaments and the media have common interests in seeing to it that the media is not manipulated into promoting the cause of terrorism or its methods. But policymakers do not want to see terrorism, or anti-terrorism, eroding freedom of the press, which is one of the crucial pillars of democratic societies.   This is a dilemma that appears at times to be difficult to reconcile completely – one with which societies will continually have to struggle.   A number of options, none without costs and risks, exist for enhancing the effectiveness of government and media-oriented responses to terrorism and for preventing the media from furthering terrorist goals as a by-product of vigorous and free reporting. These include financing joint training exercises on media obligations; establishing a government terrorism information response centre; promoting the use of media pools; promoting voluntary press coverage guidelines; and monitoring terrorist threats to the media. Parliament and the media, which support and provide strength to the edifice of democracy, can play a significant role in keeping society well informed and creating constructive public opinion. Their role becomes all the more significant in crisis situations such as those engendered by terrorism and armed conflict. The challenge for policymakers is to explore mechanisms that enhance cooperation between the media and the government so as to accommodate honest coverage while limiting the gains which uninhibited coverage may provide to the cause of terrorism. The dissemination of authentic information in a constructive manner can go a long way to creating peaceful conditions in society by containing armed conflicts and rooting out terrorism.