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Assembly

Vice-President Jorge Lacão

HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE PORTUGUESE PARLIAMENT

(Jorge Lacão, Member of Parliament)

I am here today to speak to you about the defence of Human Rights at the Portuguese Parliament, the Parliament of a country and a society which, 42 years ago, abandoned a dictatorial and colonial regime and has, from that point on, been a representative, pluralist democracy, based on the utmost respect for the principle of democratic alternation.

I am here today to speak to you about a Parliament founded on a Constitution befitting a democratic constitutional state, based on the principle of the separation of powers. It is, therefore, a pillar of the balance of powers between sovereign bodies, expressing a strong respect for the protection of rights, freedoms and guarantees, and holding the dignity of the human being as its founding principle. The system of rights, freedoms and guarantees is guided from above, by the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Given the nature of the political system, the Portuguese Parliament forms part of a democratic structure based on the principle of equality among all citizens and the prohibition of discrimination, of any type, on the grounds of wealth, ideology, religion, ethnicity, gender, or any other reason.

Peaceful relations between peoples are inherent to the Portuguese Constitution, which prioritises co-operation and the shared development of nations, while fully respecting the sovereignty of each one.

This is the framework of values which guides the Portuguese Parliament and structures its actions, of which I am happy to highlight the following, given their relevance in terms of the defence of Human Rights:

- The existence of a specialised permanent Committee for Constitutional Affairs, Rights, Freedoms and Guarantees, which exists without prejudice to the existence of a separate Constitutional Court;
- The operation, within this committee, of a permanent subcommittee on equality, aimed in particular at assessing all matters regarding gender equality and combating discrimination, particularly as regards the status of women;
- This has led to the Portuguese Parliament adopting a principle which aims at promoting gender parity in the lists of parliamentary candidates, thus guaranteeing far greater balance between men and women in popular representation, with an

impact in many areas, including the scope of measures to prevent and tackle domestic violence.

- The introduction by our Parliament – the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal – of an annual human rights prize, awarded every year to commemorate the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, recognising the individuals or organisations who have made the most significant contribution to the defence of human rights, whether within Portugal or abroad;
- Meanwhile, the creation of several friendship groups enables closer cooperation between Parliaments from all over the world;
- Finally, participation in several international institutions which promote peaceful coexistence between peoples, significant examples being involvement in the Inter-Parliamentary Union itself, as well as the parliamentary assemblies of the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, the Union for the Mediterranean, and the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP).

All of these areas of intervention enable the Portuguese Parliament to fulfil its role as an active promoter of international co-operation, peace and conflict prevention. Through these actions, Portugal aims to contribute to an international society founded on sustainable development and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The Portuguese Parliament and state also stand out for being among the first to adopt the International Treaty drawn up by the International Criminal Court (ICC), demonstrating our commitment to helping alleviate the scourge of crime against humanity.

I therefore believe that I can truthfully say, before this assembly, that despite its limited size and population, democratic Portugal reaches out to the most diverse parts of the world, thanks to its political actions, history, culture and language. Today, there are 280 million Portuguese speakers from Europe to Africa, from America to Asia and Oceania, making it the 5th most widely spoken language in the world.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the Portuguese Parliament pays close attention to many crucial and internationally significant decisions.

At the last IPU plenary session, held in Lusaka, the Members of the Portuguese delegation had the opportunity to express Portugal's firm commitment to the process of selecting the new UN Secretary-General. Today, we know that the Portuguese António Guterres is the elected Secretary-General of the UN, following

an innovative voting process, the democratic transparency of which has reflected extremely well on the institution.

During this process, the Portuguese Parliament and its Members, of all political persuasions, were unanimously committed to supporting the candidacy of António Guterres, a personality who introduced himself to the world stage with the promise of providing strong leadership in today's complex international context, while remaining faithful to the fundamental values of the United Nations Charter.

It was on the basis of these values that the former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) succeeded in placing the plight of the refugees on the agenda of the Member States and international institutions. It is this point which I wish to stress to you, above all others.

Portugal is part of the group of 28 countries which make up the European Union. As we all know, Europe has been under great pressure from large migratory flows from several areas, but mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb region and, on a massive scale, as a result of the war in Syria, creating a huge humanitarian crisis, particularly accentuated in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean.

Faced with this migratory pressure, two options are open to the European nations: to close in on themselves, allowing egotistic nationalism to prevail and preventing refugees from crossing their borders, or to establish support mechanisms, making a commitment to share the efforts to house and integrate refugees between all states, according to a mutually-supportive quota system, proportional to their capacity.

It is the latter solution that is being spearheaded by the Portuguese Government, with the support of the country's Parliament. We are committed to putting the values of international solidarity into practice. We want to contribute to the prevention of conflict through dialogue within the international organisations to which we belong. We are particularly active at regional level, but we maintain a wide-reaching presence in the most diverse global forums, in accordance with our worldwide focus. We are proud to be a country in which our representative democracy is defined by peace and harmony, while still leaving space for the expression of differences, freedom of expression and thought, both by the governing party and the opposition, and constantly striving to build bridges and resolve conflicts peacefully and fairly.

Peaceful and fair resolution of conflicts, constant strengthening of mechanisms for dialogue and national and international solidarity, especially with the most vulnerable and those fleeing conflict and war in search of refuge and safety, commitment to reinforcing international security, while fully respecting human

rights: these are the guiding principles of the Portuguese Parliament, in accordance with the prevailing objectives of the Portuguese state.

We believe in the search for world peace as proposed by Immanuel Kant: a utopia, certainly, but a utopia with the capacity to mobilise people, one which belongs to righteous men and women, populations and peoples who continue to believe in, and wish to live by, the values of democracy, tolerance and freedom and, in short, the promise and respect of human rights put into practice.