

SPEECH – 135th IPU Assembly in Geneva, 23 to 27
October 2016 – Dr. Sabine Sütterlin-Waack

General debate on the subject of: “Human rights
abuses as precursors of conflict: Parliaments as early
responders”

Dear ...

Good news first: we are living in the most peaceful
world in history so far – despite wars in Syria and
Iraq, in Yemen, Libya, South Sudan, Nigeria and
Afghanistan, despite Islamist terrorism, and despite
global refugee flows.

Since the mid-1970s, there has been a steady
increase in the proportion of countries classified as
free. While in 1975 just 25 per cent of all countries
were considered free and 41 per cent not free, this
ratio has been turned on its head over the following
40 years.

But yet, the ratio of free countries to those which are not free has been stagnating for around 15 years. Moreover, the data produced by human rights organisations reveals an alarming trend: for almost 10 years, the number of countries introducing curbs on liberties has been rising, compared to the number of countries extending civil liberties.

Which leads us to the bad news: Throughout the world, the human rights situation is becoming more and more difficult. Freedom of expression, association and assembly, in particular, are coming under pressure, as current reports by human rights organisations show.

According to Amnesty International, the highest number of executions in 25 years was recorded in 2015. It also reports that press freedom and freedom of expression are not fully respected in two-thirds of the 160 countries it surveyed. In

addition, unfair trials were conducted in every second country.

Many governments are taking an increasingly restrictive approach to domestic and foreign NGOs because of their concern that new digital communication platforms could accelerate social and political movements in a way they cannot control.

Often, a heightened fear of terrorism is also leading to a cutback of human rights. This trend can also be observed in Europe. Here, as elsewhere, the handling of the global refugee flow is revealing worrying differences of opinion with regard to the universal validity of human rights.

What position is the German Bundestag taking in relation to these developments? The German Bundestag's fundamental stance is to express its

deep respect for all men and women who are courageously defending human rights in their countries in difficult political circumstances.

With a view to extending the principles of good governance, the German Bundestag welcomes and supports all bilateral and multilateral efforts to promote democratic and rule-of-law structures and independent judicial systems worldwide.

For example, the Bundestag supports the German Foundation for International Legal Cooperation. Since its establishment in 1992, the Foundation has, on behalf of Germany's Government, successfully assisted a large number of reform-minded countries to modernise their legal systems.

Germany's missions abroad and political foundations play a prominent role in the protection of human rights defenders. They demonstrate their

interest through regular contacts with human rights defenders and invitations to events held locally and in Germany. The German delegation pursues the same aim when visiting the host countries of the IPU Assemblies, since publicity and recognition from foreign institutions can provide a certain level of protection.

In many countries, politicians are among the human rights defenders who are at risk – whether they are elected parliamentarians, opposition or local politicians. The German Bundestag therefore set up the “Parliamentarians Protect Parliamentarians” programme in 2003 - supported by the German delegation to the IPU, the German delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the OSCE and many human rights organisations.

This programme is intended to help draw attention, in Germany and abroad, to the plight of individual human rights defenders who are at risk and, in

many cases, have been detained. To this end, talks are held with political decision-makers, letters of petition are sent, and face-to-face meetings and discussions abroad are facilitated. It is also recommended that Members of the Bundestag participating in the programme visit human rights defenders in prison, if possible, press for a fair trial, and observe the conduct of the trial.

The German Bundestag's Committee on Human Rights plays a key and a coordinating role in this context. It supplies information to the parliamentarians, provides assistance and recommendations, and keeps a continuously updated list of at-risk human rights defenders. For our part, we parliamentarians inform the Secretariat of the Committee on Human Rights about our experiences during delegation trips and our discussions with persecuted or at-risk parliamentarians.

Although the road is often a long and difficult one, the parliamentarians' support gives the human rights defenders a feeling of moral support and encouragement.

For years, the IPU has been a reliable partner in this endeavour. The IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, in particular, should be singled out in this context.

Our parliaments can be an effective early warning system for conflicts. For no serious conflict – whether civil war or international aggression – takes place without human rights violations.

We parliamentarians have an obligation to use our special position, in terms of privileged access to information or even to political decision-makers and the public stage, to highlight human rights

violations at an early stage and draw attention to conflicts.

So let's work together to reverse the trend we have witnessed in recent years.

Thank you!