



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.

# 136<sup>th</sup> IPU Assembly

Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1- 5 April 2017



## Inaugural address by the IPU President at the 136<sup>th</sup> IPU Assembly

Dhaka, 1 April 2017

H.E. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh, Madam Speaker of Bangladesh Parliament Bangladesh, Assistant Secretary General of the UN Mr. Jenca Miloslav, IPU Secretary General Mr. Martin Chungong, Member of the IPU Executive Committee, Hon. Speakers, Vice Speakers and Heads of Delegations, Fellow members of parliament, Distinguished delegates, guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

As the curtain rises on Inter-Parliamentary Union's 136<sup>th</sup> Assembly, it is a privilege for me to address and welcome you in my home city of Dhaka.

In exercising this privilege, I am deeply humbled as a proud citizen of Bangladesh by fact that IPU - the global organization of national parliaments comprising 171 parliaments, 46,000 MPs representing almost 7 billion people - will be having an Assembly in Bangladesh for the first time in its 138 year old history and that too with one of the most impressive attendances – about 1400 Delegates from 164 Full Member, Associate and Observer Delegations (no fewer than 82 led by Speakers and Vice Speakers) to debate the most pressing issues on radar screen of global parliamentary community. Indeed a momentous day for people of Bangladesh!

Starting from when I first approached H.E. Prime Minister about possibility of Bangladesh hosting an IPU Assembly to Deputy Speaker Hon. Fazle Rabbi Miah presenting the formal proposal to IPU to where we stand today, this has been an amazing journey but not without challenges - this is Bangladesh's largest international event ever and at a time when security issues loom large globally.

I wish to thank each of you for coming to Dhaka for this Assembly, for choosing hope over fear and believing that unity and solidarity is the best antidote when some try to divide and weaken us.

Allow me to record our appreciation and gratitude for the excellent arrangements and gracious hospitality to the Government of Bangladesh, in particular H.E. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. We are also grateful to Madam Speaker, Deputy Speaker, Chief Whip, Whips and all MPs and Secretariat of Parliament of Bangladesh.

All Ministers and Ministries of Government of Bangladesh have also been extremely supportive and in particular I wish to recognise the outstanding cooperation received from the Ministers of Finance, Commerce, Home Affairs and of course Civil Aviation and Tourism. Organising and managing has been an exceptional team effort with the Prime Minister herself providing the requisite leadership and guidance.

Bangladesh Parliament joined the IPU in 1972, a year after gaining independence under visionary leadership of its Founding Father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Termed once as a "bottomless basket" by Dr Henry Kissinger, Bangladesh continues to confound its critics and defy odds.

#IPU136

Bangladesh's progress in women's empowerment, role of its security forces in UN peacekeeping, the success it has had in exporting textiles, resilience of its communities to disasters is well documented. Let me share some information that is perhaps not as well known.

Its per capita income has in last ten years increased from US\$560 to US\$1466. The country has progressed from being one of the poorest to being the 31<sup>st</sup> largest economy in the world in terms of PPP and is on track to be the 28<sup>th</sup> largest economy by 2030. Bangladesh will be 2nd fastest growing economy by 2019 per CNN.

Over the last 8 years, around 50 million people have graduated out of poverty and during same period, extreme poverty rate has halved from 24.2% to 12%.

People are now living longer, healthier and more comfortable lives. 92% children have been brought under immunization coverage. Drastic reductions have been achieved in infant, under-5 and maternal mortality rates.

Despite scarcity of land and a large population, the country has become a self-sufficient nation in food from a food deficient one within eight years.

Energy security provides another impressive instance - it has one of the world's largest off-grid solar home system (SHS) program in the world, with more than 4 million such systems already installed, and 70,000 more being added each month.

Quality and free education is transforming the lives of people. The country has achieved 100% enrollment rate in primary education. There is now 50 : 50 gender parity in primary education. It operates one of the biggest free textbook distribution schemes in the world – till date 2.3 billion textbooks have been distributed. Girls' education has been prioritized by providing free public education up to graduate level and by providing stipends and scholarships. This has slashed the dropout rate in half.

There are now around 130 million mobile users in Bangladesh, up from 20 million ten years back. 3G technology has been made available nationwide, whilst 4G will be rolled out within this year. Number of internet users in Bangladesh has also grown at an astonishing rate - from 1.5 million to almost 65 million today in a mere ten years.

Bangladesh is one of the developing world's leading examples when it comes to ensuring financial inclusion through mobile banking. Currently 38 million use this innovation and by 2020, this is likely to exceed 50 million.

Goal 16 of SDGs with its focus on effective and transparent institutions as well as good governance will help Bangladesh consolidate and build on its remarkable progress and make it sustainable. Story of Bangladesh, its people and its remarkable achievements particularly over last 10 years is indeed an inspiring one, that too in face of adversity such as climate change impacts and increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters. It is a powerful example of how people can benefit from compelling vision, all embracing ownership of and deep commitment thereof, fuelled and driven by strong leadership.

I hope during your stay here you will be able to have a better understanding and gain deeper insights into these achievements and value them as good practices to take back to your countries.

Pluralism, diversity, inclusiveness are central to the IPU. The Parliament of Bangladesh last month unanimously adopted a resolution declaring March 25 as Genocide Day. History testifies to fact that at heart of genocide lies unchecked hatred, xenophobia, discrimination and racism. Let us all learn from history and ensure that the world will never ever witness another genocide.

Fellow parliamentarians,

2015 saw watershed global agreements based on a bold new vision of leaving no one behind and steering the world towards a prosperous, safer and sustainable future - Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Accord on Climate Change.

We at the IPU have been actively engaged in articulating and defining these UN processes and now we are focussed on implementation.

In concert with Parliament of Bangladesh, IPU organised in Dhaka in January 2016 Summit of Speakers of Parliaments of South Asia and the second meeting of this Forum was recently hosted by Hon. Sumitra Mahajan, Speaker of Lok Sabha in Indore, Madhya Pradesh. This is the only regional platform of Speakers that is dedicated to implementation of the SDGs.

The IPU continues to engage with and encourage national parliaments to host regional events on the SDGs and till date we have already seen such initiatives in Panama, Romania, Hungary, Fiji, Uganda and of course the very successful Summit of Women Speaker's of Parliament in Abu Dhabi last December, so well led by first Women Speaker of the Arab world.

Over the next months, we look forward to regional parliamentary events in Vietnam for Asia Pacific region and National People's Congress of China hosting its second parliamentary capacity building event for Parliaments in Asia and Africa.

Partnerships are an important cornerstone of Agenda 2030. In addition to the established mechanism of checks and balances between the judiciary, executive and legislature in context of "separation of powers", for implementation of this transformative agenda, a new dynamic of what I would refer to as "complementarity of powers" where all three organs cooperate and work together is called for.

IPU's relationship with the UN continues to broaden and deepen and the new global strategy of women, children's and adolescent's health is just one example. A new Agreement that elevates the IPU UN relationship to a strategic level was signed last year and a resolution on the interaction between the UN, IPU and national parliaments has been adopted unanimously at the General Assembly.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The world we live in is more connected than ever before and the integration of our global economy has made life better for billions of men, women and children.

It means more children have enough to eat and fewer mothers die giving birth. A person born today is more likely to be healthy, live longer, and have access to greater opportunities than at any time in human history and cracking the genetic code promises to cure diseases that have plagued us for centuries.

The Internet can deliver the entirety of human knowledge spanning civilizations, centuries and generations to a young girl in the remotest village on a single hand-held device. An explosion of social media has given ordinary people more ways to express themselves, and has raised people's expectations for those of us in power.

Expectations rise faster than governments can deliver, governing becomes more complex and difficult as people lose trust in institutions and a perceived sense of injustice undermines people's faith in the system.

The existing path to global integration does however require a course correction. We cannot continue to ignore inequality within and among nations; ignore the appeal of ethnic and sectarian identities; leave our international institutions under resourced.

Alternative, powerful visions of the world gain currency as extremism in the name of religion, aggressive nationalism coupled with crude populism strikes a chord in our society amongst the forgotten people reflecting their dissatisfaction and frustration.

This takes me on to the theme we have chosen for our General Debate - ***Redressing inequalities: Delivering on dignity and well-being for all.***

UN statistics indicate that there is sufficient wealth to eliminate all the poverty in the world but that wealth is unevenly distributed. A recent Oxfam study has revealed that the world's 8 richest individuals own as much wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of the world. Put otherwise, the wealth of the world's richest 1% is equal to the wealth of the other 99% of the global population.

Other forms of inequality include gender inequality or discrimination based on race, ethnicity, age, origin, political and sexual persuasions, among others.

I look forward to a frank and candid debate in true parliamentary style and spirit on this topic at this Assembly and hearing the enlightening views of Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Mr. Kailash Satyarthi in this regard.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Against such a backdrop, the ideals of democracy become even more relevant and important. This year will mark a watershed for the IPU as it celebrates the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Democracy, a visionary statement. IPU strongly believes principles of democracy, human rights and dignity and good governance remain the basic foundation for progress and prosperity.

Despite shortcomings, democracy in its various home-grown varieties has proved its worth over time. Recent polls around the world bear strong testimony to the fact that MPs must be more attentive to their constituents and not take them for granted.

The role of multilateralism in today's complex world - and by extension the role of international organizations - also comes into play.

Parliamentary diplomacy will also take on even greater significance in promotion of political dialogue for peaceful resolution of conflict, even those that seem intractable and hopeless, building trust between nations as well as promoting people to people contact and fostering connectivity.

As a political organization, the IPU must take a stand when efforts to secure peace are negated and we have strongly condemned building of new settlements by Israel in occupied territory. We advocate and reiterate our commitment to a two-State solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, peace in Korean Peninsula, an end to conflict in Syria, a solution to the deepening crisis in Yemen and an end to persecution of Rohingyas Muslims in Myanmar.

Venezuela has been in our radar for some time now and recent events where the Parliament has reportedly been stripped of powers is deeply disconcerting. As a matter of principle, our solidarity is with Parliaments where ever they are obstructed or impeded in carrying out their constitutional mandate.

We meet at a time when entering an age of famine. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres appealed for \$4.4 billion by end of March in order to tackle all of these crises. That money has not come putting some 20 million people at risk of famine.

Let me say something that should be obvious but is rarely explicit: a famine is never just a famine. Famine is also political and they occur in part because those with the power and authority to prevent them fail to do so.

Fellow parliamentarians,

Returning to matters closer to home, we are pleased to be welcoming Central African Republic and Tuvalu to the IPU fold, increasing our membership to 173, the highest it has ever been. We are also delighted to welcome observer delegations from Brunei, Marshall Islands, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands at this Assembly.

In our drive to achieve universal membership, we would like to reach out to all parliaments big and small in all regions of the world. We will focus our gaze in particular on the parliaments of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Caribbean and the Pacific and try to encourage them to participate in our work. We hope recently created Parliamentary Solidarity Fund will help us achieve that goal.

Also at this Assembly we will be adopting resolutions on the outside interference in the internal affairs of States and the financial inclusion of women as a driver of development. Based on the range of emergency item proposals I have seen, I believe we will have a lively Assembly with constructive debates and discussions.

As part of our paper smart initiative, I invite you to download as many documents as you can from the Assembly website using the Assembly App. We are also forging ahead with our archives project, aimed at preserving our institutional memory and making it easily accessible.

I am delighted to announce two ground-breaking initiatives that you will witness during course of this Assembly. One is launch of a web based TV channel dedicated to the IPU and apart heightening our visibility, it will enable us to share good practices and promote our capacity-building and also network more easily in-between Assemblies. The second relates to making our 136<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Dhaka a green one.

Events have an inherent impact on the communities where they are held and generate a carbon footprint that is a measure of the impact of human activities on the environment in terms of the amount of Greenhouse Gases (GHG) produced. A green assembly incorporates environmental initiatives to minimize its negative impact on the planet. Work is on going to measure the carbon footprint of this Assembly and we will thereafter offset the emissions to achieve carbon neutrality and strike a harmonious balance between consumption and conservation.

It is my hope that during your stay in my homeland, you will be able to enjoy the best of Bengali hospitality and appreciate the richness and diversity of our culture. Some of you may even opt to become goodwill Ambassadors of the people of Bangladesh.

On this note, I wish you fruitful deliberations and a productive and defining Assembly.

Thank you.