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**STATEMENT BY MR. ANDERS B. JOHNSON, IPU SECRETARY GENERAL,
AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE 30th AIPA GENERAL ASSEMBLY**
Pattaya City, Thailand, 4 August 2009

Mr. President,
Distinguished delegates,

I am honored to take the floor at this opening session and to greet you on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I would like to compliment you, Mr. President, and all our Thai hosts for everything you have done to provide us with such warm hospitality. Let me add that I look forward to spending more time in Thailand. This afternoon, the President and I will sign an agreement whereby the Parliament of Thailand will host the 122nd IPU Assembly in Bangkok from 27 March to 1 April next year. It is likely to be the largest ever global parliamentary meeting and I hope you will all join us on that occasion.

We are often told that Asia is one of the most diverse regions of the world and that it is particularly difficult to forge agreements and reach common understanding across such a wide spectrum of political, economic, social and cultural development. ASEAN demonstrates how wrong that perception is, and I wish to congratulate ASEAN on having adopted its Charter and agreed to put in place its own human rights mechanism.

I also wish to congratulate AIPA for its achievements in forging greater parliamentary cooperation in the region and providing a parliamentary dimension to ASEAN. Step by patient step you are pursuing a vision of becoming the ASEAN Parliament. The IPU can only encourage you and, should you so wish, lend its modest assistance based on our own experience in promoting peace, democracy and development.

As you know, the IPU has worked with many of your parliaments in developing a shared understanding of what we mean by a democratic parliament. Our 2006 landmark study on parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century identifies five core objectives which every parliament should pursue: namely to be representative, transparent, accessible, accountable, and effective in legislating and holding government to account.

Late last year we issued a toolkit to help parliaments undertake their own self-assessment of how good they are at meeting these objectives and identify where they can do better. I would like to encourage you to use this instrument which is meant to help parliaments exercise control of their development.

In this context, let me also draw your attention to the International Day of Democracy which is celebrated every year on 15 September. This year, the IPU encourages all parliaments to focus their activities on that day on the theme of political tolerance.

There is a lack of political tolerance in many countries in all parts of the world. Yet, political tolerance is essential in every democracy. Political tolerance means accepting and respecting others whose viewpoints differ from one's own. Democracy, while necessarily different in every country, is a clear rejection of the notion that "might makes right". It implies instead that we should treat each other, and be treated, as equals. Democratic life is both the right to differ as well as the acceptance of such difference by all. Democracy

implies respect for the plurality of views and virtues of dialogue as a means of resolving conflict.

The IPU also extends its support to countries emerging from conflict to make the transition towards stability rooted in democratic institutions. We held a seminar in Phnom Penh in March this year, together with the Parliament of Cambodia, on reconciliation for the parliaments of this region. I would like to thank the Parliament of Cambodia for its gracious support at that event. We hope to continue this work based on our conviction that there can be no better place than parliament for achieving reconciliation, peace and development.

Protecting minority rights and ensuring that national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples are represented in parliament are difficult issues everywhere. Their solution always depends on the particular circumstances of a given country.

Experience nevertheless demonstrates that inclusive parliaments help to strengthen democracy and prevent conflict. The IPU therefore seeks to gain a better understanding of the nature of the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament. We are carrying out a survey on this subject, and I would be very grateful for your help in making sure that your parliament takes part in this exercise and completes the questionnaire we have sent to you.

The IPU places special emphasis on the need to respect universal human rights of members of parliament. You will agree with me that without freedom of opinion and speech, the mandate given by the people to their MPs to represent them becomes meaningless. IPU's work in this field is based on dialogue and cooperation and I wish to take this opportunity to ask for your support in upholding these rights.

As a friend who respects the countries and people of this region, I also wish to take up the invitation we heard this morning from the special observer of Myanmar to encourage his country to pursue an inclusive democratization process that can lead to the re-establishment of a parliament through free and fair elections and the release of those members of parliament who remain in detention.

Mr. President,

I would like to end my remarks by saying one word about the economic and financial crisis. This is a story of a crisis foretold. We cannot claim to have been ignorant. There were many warning signals. But the development model we pursue ever so blindly and the balance of power in society are such that we seem to have abdicated all essential decisions to money and the market.

At its most fundamental level, therefore, the crisis is one that touches on what kind of society we want to live in. It concerns issues of morals and ethics. At a very minimum, the response must be one in which we abandon business as usual and work to find a better balance between the voice of society, the role of the State and the dynamics of the market.

It is essential that people participate in this debate. From my perspective, this means, of course, that you - the representatives of the people - should be part of the debate and actively help designing strategies for the future. The IPU looks forward to work in concert with you towards achieving these goals.

Thank you.