



# INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

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## **STATEMENT BY MR. ANDERS B. JOHNSON, IPU SECRETARY GENERAL, AT ARAB INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION**

*Cairo, 2 March 2010*

Speaker Sorour,  
Honorable Speakers and Presidents of Parliament,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to start by thanking you, Dr. Sorour, for so graciously hosting us here in Cairo as well as the outgoing and incoming chair of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, Honorable Al Issai and Honorable Zanon for giving this opportunity for the IPU to address your august assembly. The IPU greatly values its close cooperation with the AIPU and we look forward to even stronger ties in the future.

Mr. Speaker,

A year has passed since your last conference. On that occasion, the President of the IPU, Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, addressed the major challenges on the international agenda. He had arrived in Oman from the occupied Palestinian territories and he spoke to you of the destruction wrought on the Palestinian people which he had witnessed at first hand.

A year later, we have made little progress. The Palestinians in Gaza still live under siege and the peace process, such as it is, is making no headway. Yet another year has gone by and the Palestinian people remain unable to realize their right to self-determination and to live a dignified life free from occupation.

It has been a frustrating year. It has also been a year of crises – financial, economic, food security, and climate change, and most recently, natural disasters on a scale the world has not witnessed in a very long time.

All of these crises have one thing in common; they have to do with the fundamentals of our societies and the values that underpin them. It is really about the kind of world we are building for ourselves.

The absence of real progress in tackling any one of these crises speaks volumes about the difficulty we have as an international community in adapting to our times and addressing – as a community – major common challenges.

The IPU has often stated that these crises also represent opportunities; opportunities to achieve real progress in society, to remedy existing inequalities and imbalances, and to build new systems based on inclusion, transparency and good governance.

The best support parliaments can provide to this process and to people everywhere is by fueling this debate and ensuring stringent oversight. People will depend upon legislators to make sure that their views and aspirations are taken into account and that government and public institutions perform to the highest standards.

It is against this backdrop that the IPU is convening the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Conference of Speakers of Parliament. It will take place at the United Nations in Geneva from 19 to 21 July. I would like to take this opportunity to urge each and every one of you to be present.

The Conference pursues five broad political objectives.

It is an opportunity for all of you to debate the contribution parliaments can make to address these crises. The theme of the conference – *Parliaments in a world in crisis: Ensuring democratic accountability for the common good* – sets the tone for the debate.

The conference takes place just two months before the United Nations General Assembly convenes to assess progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The Speakers will have an opportunity to fashion IPU's contribution to the UN General Assembly which will focus on what parliaments can do to make sure that the MDGs are met on time in 2015.

The Speakers will also examine progress in advancing standards for democratic parliaments. You will certainly remember the discussions that you launched in 2005 on this subject, which led to substantial work to develop standards and common objectives for all parliaments. This year's conference can provide important stimulus and direction for future work relating to parliaments and democracy.

The first two Speakers' Conference were instrumental in creating a new concept, that of building a parliamentary dimension to the work of the United Nations. They gave stimulus to closer cooperation between parliaments and the United Nations. The third Speakers' Conference should make an assessment of progress made and formulate proposals for the road ahead. This is particularly important since later this year your governments will hold a debate in the UN General Assembly on cooperation between the UN, parliaments and the IPU. It is important that you lay the groundwork and provide direction for that debate.

Last, but by no means least, the Speakers' Conference should examine the IPU and make recommendations for its future development. Let me say a few words about this objective.

Since its creation, the IPU has facilitated inter-parliamentary cooperation and acted as a forum for parliamentary diplomacy.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, the IPU has developed new activities in two distinct yet related areas.

On the one hand the IPU has created a program in support of democracy. It has developed standards for democracy, capacity building programs for parliaments and whole set of related activities which aim at helping parliaments build strong democratic institutions.

On the other hand, the IPU has developed multiple activities in support of the participation of parliaments in international affairs and has originated a new concept; parliamentary dimension to international cooperation. The IPU is a leading proponent of a greater parliamentary presence in international cooperation. It helps parliaments identify the steps that they and States must take to bring greater democracy to international relations.

However, parliaments and the IPU need to do significantly more to realize their ambition both in relation to building democratic parliaments and with respect to parliamentary involvement in international cooperation. A major shift in focus is required. We need to see greater political will and support, in the first instance from the parliaments themselves, but also from governments.

Concluding an international convention on the IPU would signal a clear political commitment by States to work in support of the IPU so that it can carry out its mandate to help build strong democratic parliaments. Such a convention would be a very strong symbolic act of support by States for democracy.

Such a convention would equally demonstrate States' commitment to the IPU so that it can help build a parliamentary dimension to international cooperation. The treaty would also go a long way towards avoiding duplication and overlap in international work in support of parliaments.

For all of these reasons, the President of the IPU has launched a process of reflection within the IPU and with the group of Speakers he has convened to help prepare for the conference in July. The ambition is to conclude an international convention on the IPU – a convention signed by States and ratified by parliaments – that would leave the parliamentary nature of the organization intact.

This is a matter of enormous importance to parliaments and to the IPU so we will want to proceed carefully. At the same time, we want to make progress and we therefore appeal to all of you to take part in this discussion and to join us in Geneva

in July when we hope to get a clear signal of support from all Speakers to move ahead with this idea.

Let me end my speech here in Cairo in terms similar to those employed by President Gurirab a year ago. In a few days, we will celebrate international women's day. It is a day when the IPU releases its latest analysis of progress of women in parliaments.

The statistics are encouraging. Women continue to gain ground. We have now reached a global average of 18.8 percent. It is good; however it is not nearly good enough.

Regions are not proceeding at the same pace and some are doing better than others. The Arab region has an average of women in parliament of only 9.5 percent. However, it reflects a significant increase. Only 15 years ago it was not even half of that.

We have several countries to thank for this progress. I would like to single out Kuwait where four women joined parliament in the last elections. Apart from congratulating the parliament and the people of Kuwait on this accomplishment, let me also underscore what I think is an obvious conclusion we can draw: namely that where there is political will and commitment, there is also a way to achieve results.

On that note, let me encourage all of you to do all you can to ensure that greater number of women are able to join the parliaments in the Arab region.

Thank you