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SPEECH OF IPU PRESIDENT, DR. THEO-BEN GURIRAB, AT THE SESSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Strasbourg, 22 June 2009

Mr. President,
Distinguished Parliamentarians,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be present at the opening of this summer session of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly.

This year the Inter-Parliamentary Union commemorates its 120th anniversary. I am proud to be at the helm of the IPU at this auspicious moment.

The IPU is a venerable lady, and its President is a well travelled man. For an African like myself who was present at the painful birth of my country, life has been demanding, sometimes frightening, but never boring. As Speaker of the Namibian National Assembly, I come from a part of the world where democracy has had to fight a long, hard battle to gain recognition. From being a freedom fighter to holding high political office, it has been an exciting, challenging and long adventure.

Longevity is not always an advantage. In the case of the IPU, I believe that whatever the achievements of the last 120 years, the imperative for renewal and rejuvenation should never be forgotten. Just as our parliaments need constant critical appraisal, so too do their organisations. In a world where the institutions that embody democracy are judged more harshly than ever, we must work ambitiously - even adventurously - if we are to remain useful to the people we serve.

In the IPU, we have our ambitions. Perhaps the foremost in my mind at the moment is the intention to bring more genuine democracy to international affairs and to the principal organisation that manages them, the United Nations.

As a former President of the Millennium Session of the UN General Assembly, I can claim to know the United Nations. I have seen how it has gradually, often grudgingly, awakened to the idea that parliament has a place in the international arena. In some instances the idea has taken hold. In others, mere lip service is paid to parliament. And I have seen cases, often in countries scarred by conflict, where parliament has been unaccountably ignored.

Things will not change overnight. The dictum that parliaments embody the voices of the people is accepted on the domestic front, but it tends to be viewed as utopian in multilateral spheres. I believe that without dislodging the traditional prerogatives of the executive in conducting foreign policy, it is possible to bring far more stringent parliamentary scrutiny to the workings of the multilateral bodies: not only the United Nations, but the Bretton Woods institutions as well. This will only be achieved through patience and perseverance. And oversight is only conceivable through a body that is independent from the United Nations.

In the IPU we are making steady progress. We are working closely with all the new UN bodies that deal with peace, development, democracy and human rights. We are now consulted by the Executive Heads of the UN System organizations when they develop system-wide policy. As of next year, there will be a separate item on the UN General Assembly agenda to discuss relations between parliaments, IPU and the United Nations, and the status of the Annual Parliamentary Hearing will be reinforced. All of this has the backing of the UN Member States and is part of the strategic relationship we are building with the United Nations. The IPU is also monitoring the "One United Nations" reform. Our United Nations committee has already made exploratory visits to two of the eight UN reform pilot countries, Tanzania and Vietnam, to see for ourselves how the UN is streamlining its operations in order - and let's be frank here - to give the taxpayer more value for his money.

It is through practical, realistic strategies such as this that we will bring more democracy to the United Nations, and not by attaching new institutions to their bureaucracy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The IPU is a global organisation. 153 parliaments take part in our work and soon enough we will achieve universal membership. By the very nature of things most of our activities take place in developing countries. However, in every continent of the world, we work with the regional parliamentary assemblies, and in Europe we are proud of the close working relationship we have constructed with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Your summer session is going to devote much of its attention to the state of human rights in Europe. I see that tomorrow you discuss the situation in Belarus. As you know, the IPU defends persecuted parliamentarians the world over. The outrageous disappearances in Belarus brought us to collaborate with your Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. Such collaboration is very precious and should be widened. Cases like this are common to all regions, including mine, and we must not let down our guard in defending all parliamentarians who are gagged or murdered for speaking their mind.

The IPU works to promote the full representation of society in parliament, and it can be proud of what it has done to help women enter the world of politics. Much more needs to be done, including in Europe where the record remains fairly dismal. Building on our experience in promoting the full participation of women in political life, our current work aims to increase knowledge on the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament; provide tools for parliaments and other stakeholders on promoting inclusive parliaments; and build capacity to advocate for more inclusive parliaments.

We have also worked together in fighting violence against women. There is more to do before we eradicate this grotesque phenomenon. After the completion of the Council of Europe's successful campaign on violence against women, I am open to suggestions for common

initiatives as we join the UN Secretary General's campaign to end violence against women from 2008 to 2015.

I began these remarks by referring to the need for critical appraisal of our parliaments. Whichever the continent we hail from, there is need for dogged attachment to our powers of scrutiny and oversight. I am reminded of the IPU's recent Parliamentary Conference on the Global Economic Crisis, which concluded inter alia that more could have been done by parliaments and parliamentarians to avert the catastrophe. While we should not confuse parliaments with audit institutions, we are the watchdogs for the daily workings of our societies, and we must act on that duty.

But our planet is imperilled by more than the misuse of money, devastating as its consequences may be for many. Let us not forget, the great majority of the inhabitants of the earth have no money to lose in the first place. They have never lost a house through the foreclosure of a loan because they have never known what it is to live in a house. Against the fault lines in the banking system must be measured the seismic shifts caused by rising food prices, unstable fuel costs, and the devastating effects of changing climate patterns. In short we must measure the effects of poverty. Our parliaments must be at the forefront of this reappraisal.

Finally, if democracies are in discredit, we should lead by example. In the IPU, I have overseen the launch of an exercise in parliamentary self-assessment. This venture is based on an easily accessible toolkit which has already been successfully tested in several parliaments. It is geared to our good practice guide, which proposes how democratic a parliament is against five criteria: it should be representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective. I recommend that all your parliaments engage in this assessment exercise.

Fellow parliamentarians, I shall encroach upon your time no longer. Let me close by saying how much the IPU values its relations with this distinguished Parliamentary Assembly, which we hope will continue to grow in coming years, particularly in some of the areas I have outlined. I wish you all a successful session. Together let us make parliaments a force to be reckoned with in our turbulent, unstable world.