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Address by the IPU Secretary General, Mr. Martin Chungong, on the occasion of the Forum of Parliaments of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (FP-ICGLR)

Luanda, 2 December 2015

H.E Fernando da Piedade Dias Dos Santos, Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Angola

The Rt. Hon. Sen. David Ekwee Ethuro, Speaker of the Senate of the Republic of Kenya, President of the Parliamentary Forum of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region,

Hon Speakers of the Region present,

Members of Parliament

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to participate in this Sixth Plenary Assembly of your Forum, the parliamentary arm of the Conference on the Great Lakes Region. I am pleased to do so on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which is the global umbrella organization of the world's parliaments. I note with satisfaction that all parliaments represented here are members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Let me at the very outset express my heartfelt thanks to the National Assembly of the Republic of Angola for its warm hospitality. I am happy to be back in this beautiful country and to be able to witness the considerable progress that has been achieved in the past several years.

Angola, the most recent member of your Forum will no doubt be keen to share with you all its experience in post-conflict peace building.

A couple of weeks ago, I was pleased to welcome the sitting President and the Secretary General of your Forum at IPU Headquarters in Geneva. I came away from our discussions ever more convinced of the convergence and nobility of the ideals shared by the IPU and the Forum.

I would like to salute the Forum for the invaluable work it is doing in promoting dialogue and exchange in the midst of the current manifold challenges facing the region. Conflict, post-conflict and post-election crises are but some of these challenges. The Executive Secretary of the ICGLR has just enumerated a long list of these challenges. In a way, we can say you have your work cut out for you.

As I am sure you will agree with me, democracy is about giving voice to the people, promoting the rule of law, human rights and women's empowerment, among others. Parliaments, yours included, as the pillars of democracy, have a crucial role in the management and prevention of conflict and in the recovery and reconstruction phases of those of your countries riven by conflict.

In this regard, I cannot overemphasise the importance of Parliament as the preeminent platform for dialogue and the mediation of differences. For it to live up to the billing, it has to be both representative and inclusive of all sectors of society – men, women, youth, disabled persons and minorities. This underscores the critical role of elections, especially elections that are conducted in a consensual manner and under conditions which make their outcome acceptable to all concerned. It is only when elections are conducted in a transparent, fair and free manner that their results can be viewed as credible and legitimate. Needless to say, this is crucial for peace and stability. It is therefore fitting that the strap line of your Assembly is how parliaments can help improve electoral processes.

Let me also point out that parliamentary action can only be effective when it is the result of a transparent and inclusive political process. This is even more desirable and needed in societies that are emerging from conflict. At the risk of sounding condescending, may I say that it is incumbent on you, as the representatives of the people, to do what parliaments do best, namely bringing people closer and acting as an important, transparent and accountable vehicle for political mediation and action.

Indeed, parliament can only realize and achieve its full potential as a unique platform for dialogue and action in a context of respect and trust, with the full participation of men and women of all sectors of society, in partnership with political leaders, civil society organizations and the private sector. Furthermore, this calls for mechanisms that ensure that all political voices are heard and that decisions and policies are devised in a more collaborative fashion for the good of all and not just segments of the population. Similarly, it is important to give voice to the youth, to empower them and create opportunities for them, if we stand any chance of harnessing the potential they represent. The youth are the future but the future has to be prepared today. Indeed, investing in youth is an invaluable conflict-prevention tool, offering them a bright future, instead of leaving them to drift into disenchantment, apathy, and at worst, the hopelessness and brutality of violent extremism.

I would like to use this opportunity to state the IPU's commitment to working with you in making your parliaments evermore fit for purpose and to live up to their responsibilities as the legitimate representatives of the people. In this undertaking, I am sure you will continue to work to ensure that your parliaments are strong and function in an ever more democratic fashion, so that they become more representative, transparent, accountable, accessible and effective.

This is all the more imperative today as peoples' expectations of their leaders are evolving with the rest of the world. Parliaments and parliamentarians need to be tuned to their people and respond to their needs. They need to be more proactive in addressing those needs.

Allow me to stress how important parliaments and their members are as messengers of peace. As leaders, it is your bounden duty to be the torch bearers of peace, to be the voice of moderation, and to serve as role models in your societies. The instant nature of communications today is a powerful tool for conveying the message of peace and dialogue in lieu of hatred and violence. Every word you utter, every action you take is heard and witnessed almost instantaneously across the country, region and world and has the potential to heal just as it can fan the flames of conflict.

National parliaments are important symbols of, and provide a critical forum for, leadership and safeguarding the rule of law and human rights. In order to function independently and effectively, parliaments need to be political spaces where peoples' representatives can speak and act without fear of prosecution and persecution. Yet this should never be confused with impunity for corrupt or illegal behaviour.

Your Forum – the FP- ICGLR – is an important vehicle and has a comparative advantage vis-à-vis the individual national parliaments. It can and should send a strong message that the leaders of the region are open to dialogue, provide a space for the opposition, respect constitutional arrangements, etc.

The IPU has worked with many of the parliaments present here to promote those ideals and implement practical measures to achieve them. We stand ready to continue to do so especially at a time when a global development agenda has now taken shape. As I speak, world leaders are in Paris hammering out a global deal on climate change, which together with the Sustainable Development Goals adopted last September, will constitute a global roadmap for radically transforming the world and moving humanity towards greater development and welfare for all. Needless to say, parliaments, yours included, will need to factor this into your national thinking and policies. You will be required to allocate the necessary resources and hold your governments accountable for implementation. Your parliaments must be ready and should stand prepared to implement the changes and reforms required to achieve this far-reaching and ambitious agenda. The IPU will be pleased to work with you in this venture.

Your Forum is seeking observer status with the IPU. I am sure the Governing Bodies of the IPU would welcome this move as an opportunity to deepen co-operation.

Let me conclude by wishing you very successful deliberations. I am looking forward to your conclusions.

Thank you.