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IPU President's address
at Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting
Muscat, Oman, 8 March 2009

Mr. Chairman,
Colleagues,
Delegates,

I congratulate you and your Bureau for presiding over this session of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union. I want to extend my best greetings to all of you on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and to wish you a very successful conference. I am accompanied by the IPU Secretary General, Anders B. Johnsson, who is well-known to many of you, and Ambassador Nicky Nashandi, a member of the Namibian Parliament.

I wish to thank our gracious hosts for having received us so warmly. I am very pleased to have this opportunity to visit your beautiful country for the first time. From what I have seen so far, I know that I will want to return very soon. History and cultural interaction have made Oman an important part of African life.

Let me also congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, upon the admission of your parliament last October as a member of our organization. Immediately afterwards you successfully organized the third conference of women MPs of the Gulf Cooperation Council States together with the IPU. This bodes extremely well for our future cooperation.

I am particularly grateful for this opportunity to meet with you, early in my presidency of the IPU. I can well imagine that you did not all vote for me in the presidential elections. I want to assure you, however, that I am the President of all IPU members, that I will work for all of you, and that I look for your support in helping me develop our Organization .

The same day that I was elected IPU President, the Parliament of Palestine was finally admitted as the 154th member of our Organization. I am immensely pleased by this development and I want to congratulate the Palestinian delegation that is here for this important achievement.

At the same time I stand before you to express my outrage at the violence we continue to witness in the Middle East. I have worked most of my life to achieve the liberation from occupation of my country - Namibia - and to help lead the independent nation during its early formative years. Throughout many of those years, I have sat next to the Palestinian representative in the United Nations General Assembly. The Palestinian cause has also

been mine. It is a just cause of a people which demands universal support. For this to happen, Arab unity is critical.

The continued occupation of the Palestinian territories needs to end. If not, we will never see peace in the Middle East. Israeli settlement policy is contrary to the agreed roadmap for peace and mutual recognition.

My experience in fighting for the freedom of my country, however, teaches me that peace can not be imposed. It can not be bought with gunpowder. It can not be won on the battlefield. Peace will only come when the guns are silenced and the parties have sat down at the negotiating table and hammered out the details of an agreement that puts an end to occupation.

I believe that men and women like us can play a powerful role in achieving peace. We have a mandate to represent people and people want peace and justice. More than anything else, people everywhere want to live a life in safety and dignity free from fear and hatred. It is our job to do everything that we can to make that a reality now.

When the latest crisis broke out in Gaza, I issued a call for an immediate ceasefire and for Israel to lift the siege. As the bombing continued I convened an extraordinary session of the IPU Executive Committee. The committee met in late January to discuss what specifically the IPU could do to assist in finding a solution. As a result of that meeting, I decided to travel to the region and to see with my own eyes what has happened and to talk with all the leaders in the region.

I travelled to Sharm El-Sheikh last week to attend the international conference for support of the Palestinian economy for the reconstruction of Gaza. I met with President Mahmoud Abbas and many of the leaders attending the conference. I then travelled to Gaza where I learnt of the human suffering of the Palestinian people, particularly the many thousands of innocent women and children who once again have found themselves in the frontline of fire. I saw the destruction of what appeared to me to be largely civilian targets - hospitals and schools in ruins, a whole industrial area reduced to twisted metal and rubble, bombed out ministries and other institutions of governance, flattened dwellings and housing complexes.

I met with political leaders and members of parliament in Gaza as well as in Ramallah where I went the following day. I have met with some of you - Dr. Sorour kindly received me in Cairo and Mr. Majali did the same in Amman. With both I had very good talks and I hope to be able to meet with many more of you during my brief stay. Let me add that I am in contact with the Israeli authorities and I plan to go to Israel for talks as soon as a new government has been put in place.

I am here to listen and to learn. I am serious when I say that I want the IPU to assume a constructive role. I need your advice and cooperation in defining and carrying out that role. I look forward to working with you in that spirit.

As we meet here today, the world celebrates international women's day. This day represents a unique opportunity for the IPU to drive home its message calling for a genuine partnership between men and women in public life. Countries need women to

be active participants in processes that develop national policies and laws. They have a distinct contribution to make when building democratic, inclusive societies. Theirs is a role that can not be performed by men on their behalf.

The IPU does all it can to promote women's participation in politics and parliaments. We see steady progress and women represent today 18.3 percent of all members of parliament. That is almost one in every five MPs.

This is good, but it is not good enough. We really need to achieve equality and we are far from achieving that. We are even far from reaching the thirty percent threshold for women's participation which we know is needed in order for real change to take place. Only one in every six parliaments has reached that target.

I reveal no secret when I state that the Arab region is at the bottom of the scale. The regional average is a mere nine percent, the worst in the world. I want to acknowledge at the same time that this region is making important progress. You have more than doubled your average in less than ten years and you are taking several initiatives to facilitate women's entry into parliament.

The IPU is proud to be working with many of your parliaments in this field. I want to assure you of my support for us to do more together. I want to end by encouraging all of you to invest more political capital in achieving gender parity in political life. Experience everywhere proves that we can make huge advances if political leaders like ourselves speak up and provide leadership. Let us live up to that challenge.

Thank you.