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**Address by the Secretary General
of the Inter-Parliamentary Union,
Mr. Martin Chungong
to the Conference on *Ensuring Everyone's Right
to Nationality:*
*The Role of Parliaments in Preventing and
Ending Statelessness***

Cape Town, 26 November 2015

Honourable Speaker Mbete
Dr John Tescha, Executive Director of the Africa Forum of Former African Heads of State,
Representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees,
Distinguished Members of Parliament,
Special guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here today, in the hallowed halls of the Parliament of South Africa, to open this Conference on “Ensuring Everyone’s Right to Nationality: The Role of Parliaments in Preventing and Ending Statelessness”. Let me from the outset extend my warm thanks to the Parliament of South Africa for hosting us today and for the excellent arrangements made for the Conference. It is great to be back in South Africa and in Cape Town, where we were hosted for an IPU Assembly not so long ago, in 2008. I would also like to pay tribute to and thank our longstanding partner, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), for its steadfast support and for the close cooperation we have enjoyed in preparing this important meeting.

I am sure you will agree with me that this Conference is a very special one and I believe that it is very symbolic that we are discussing statelessness in South Africa – the country of freedom fighters and renowned rights’ advocates . Indeed, addressing statelessness is a question of basic human rights.

Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “*Everyone has the right to a nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.*” Concretely, this means that every individual, everywhere in the world, has the right to have a legal connection with a State. Citizenship not only provides people with a sense of identity, it entitles individuals to the protection of a State and to fundamental civil and political rights. Citizenship is the right to have rights.

There are many laws and international conventions today that relate to the question of citizenship – its acquisition, loss, or denial. States have signed up to international and regional treaties that commit to ensuring that every man, woman and child has a nationality. Despite this, more than 10 million men and women, girls and boys around

the world today have no nationality and are stateless. These figures are more than alarming. This means that millions of people today do not have the right to live a life that you or I would call “normal”; to enrol their children in school, to own or lease property, to work, marry, travel or vote. They might just as well not exist. How is this possible? And why?

Statelessness can result from a variety of causes, including conflict of laws, transfer of territory, marriage laws, administrative practices, discrimination, and lack of birth registration. Many of the world’s stateless persons are also victims of forced displacement. Indeed, people who have been uprooted from their homes are particularly vulnerable to statelessness, especially when territorial borders are redrawn. But when one looks more closely at the causes of statelessness, one common feature stands out – solutions exist and are in the hands of States; they are in the hands of governments and parliaments.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Addressing statelessness is an issue that has made its way onto the political agenda of a number of countries across the world, and rightly so. The situation of stateless people is a dramatic one. There is growing awareness, based on the principles enshrined in international treaties, of the obligation on States to resolve problems of statelessness. Solutions are within reach and parliaments have a responsibility to help identify them.

The first element of any response to ending statelessness resides in legislation and legislative reform. Becoming a party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness is a first step. Parliaments can also ensure that national legislation is consistent with international law and the related international conventions on Statelessness. National laws need to ensure that individuals will not be arbitrarily deprived of nationality and that all people will be granted a nationality.

As you all know laws are only as good as the effort and resources put into them. For laws to be properly enforced there need to be sufficient budget allocations aimed at supporting enforcement programmes and structures. Here again, parliaments have an important role to play as they hold the purse strings and can make sure that adequate funding is available for proper enforcement of legislation. This may, for instance, simply mean reallocating funds within national budgets to make sure that services and systems are in place to prevent statelessness and facilitate the acquisition of nationality.

Distinguished Members of parliament,

Who better than you know that once a law is passed it needs to be monitored. Parliament and its committees can closely follow and assess the impact of initiatives taken, ensure that they have the desired effect or modify them accordingly. They should hold government to account and ensure that the question of statelessness remains on the political agenda and is not forgotten.

Lastly, for conventions and laws to be effective, they must be widely known and understood so that they can be enforced. Legislative reform must therefore go hand in hand with information campaigns. This entails explaining the laws, highlighting the impact of statelessness on people, inviting the media, civil society organizations, the private sector and other stakeholders to join in public education programmes and to report on the implementation of laws. This is the role of parliamentarians as opinion

leaders and shapers. In the particular case of statelessness, it is vitally important to address stereotypes to avoid excluding a portion of a society.

Seeing so many parliaments represented here today is a testimony of the existing political will to put an end to statelessness. The question now is: What needs to be done to strengthen parliament's responses to statelessness? What do parliaments need?

First and foremost, to perform their role well, parliaments need to be well informed. Over 20 years ago the IPU began working on international humanitarian law issues because it discovered that parliaments were largely unaware of international commitments undertaken by States and their impact at the national level. Since then, and in cooperation with the UNHCR, we have worked to sensitize MPs inter alia to humanitarian and human rights law and, more recently, to statelessness.

Information is crucial; it is the starting point for any action. I am convinced that efforts related to resolving statelessness would gain in strength through wider dissemination of the real issues at stake and challenging misconceptions. I therefore trust that our Conference today will help achieve this objective.

For parliaments to act, they need to have adequate internal structures. This is where the role of parliamentary committees is so critical. Through their oversight function these bodies can closely follow and assess the impact of initiatives taken, ensure that they have the desired effect or modify them accordingly.

Then come skills, support and access to expertise. Committees need to work with the support of expert staff and members of parliament need to have access to training and capacity-building initiatives. The development of tools for members of parliament is also fundamental. The IPU and UNHCR have collaborated over the years on the development of several handbooks for parliamentarians; our latest being one on Nationality and Statelessness, which is before you today. I believe this will go a long way in supporting parliament's work and involvement in this area.

Strong political will is a sine qua non for parliaments to act. This is where I believe the international community needs to scale up its efforts by giving greater visibility to the work of parliaments, valuing it and thereby supporting them and their members in their work.

This leads me to my last point: partnerships.

The development of a comprehensive State response to statelessness requires a collective effort with the participation of a wide range of partners. Building partnerships within countries and across borders between members of parliament, representatives of government, civil society, the media, the private sector and international organizations is at the core of progress.

A few weeks ago, countries from around the world committed to achieving an ambitious agenda for development embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The ultimate objective of this common global effort is to leave no one behind, to ensure that societies develop in peace, harmony and respect. Addressing statelessness and putting an end to the marginalization of more than 10 million people from around the world is a starting point and will go a long way to meeting the SDGs. I hope this Conference will provide you all with the necessary tools to achieve progress in this area. Ending statelessness is a moral and legal imperative and parliamentarians, as the guardians of human rights, cannot choose who to protect and

who not to protect. Everyone in society is entitled to the enjoyment of basic human rights, to protection and recognition. We must all work together to achieve this objective.

Thank you.