



# 3<sup>rd</sup> WORLD CONFERENCE OF SPEAKERS OF PARLIAMENT

United Nations, Geneva, 19-21 July 2010



## **OPENING SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE INTERPARLIAMENTARY UNION DR. THEO-BEN GURIRAB**

Fellow Speakers of Parliament,  
Mr. Secretary-General of the United Nations,  
Dear Friends,

I take great pleasure in welcoming you all to this august gathering of Speakers of Parliament. I thank you for coming in such large numbers to this third Speakers' summit, the first to be held in Geneva.

I also express my sincere thanks to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban ki-Moon, both for allowing us to meet at the United Nations European headquarters and for honouring us with his presence this morning.

This is a special occasion. It is an event on which I have a very personal perspective. The year 2000, the dawn of the new Millennium, found me, as foreign minister of my country, presiding over the United Nations General Assembly. My job was to coordinate the many negotiations being held among the member States about what would be written in the final text known as the UN Millennium Declaration.

One of my most salient memories of that time is of my colleagues, fellow ministers, and many of your colleagues, Speakers of Parliament, requesting me to ensure there was a reference in the text to the vital role of parliaments. That was accepted. In the event, the Millennium Declaration signed by all the world's governments expressly resolved - and I quote - "to strengthen further cooperation between the United Nations and national parliaments through their world organization, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in various fields, including peace and security, economic and social development, international law and human rights and democracy and gender issues."

Today's parliamentary summit therefore flows from the Millennium Declaration. It gives us an opportunity to assess progress and give direction.

Ten years ago, the world came together in an extraordinary act of solidarity. Under the leadership of the United Nations, heads of State and government joined a broad coalition of statesmen, political leaders, Nobel laureates, businesses and foundations, stars from the world of entertainment, writers and poets, and community leaders. Together they sent a message of hope and commitment to make this world a better place for humanity.

Their message took the form of eight Millennium Development Goals, known as the MDGs, which set targets for helping the most vulnerable in society and commit us to assist each other in meeting them.

In two months, the United Nations is convening a high-level summit to assess progress towards the MDGs. We all know that the record is uneven. We also know that the economic and financial crisis is not making matters any easier. We call upon you, Mr. Secretary-General, to help us recapture that moment of hope, vision and solidarity that prevailed in 2000. We need to rekindle the political will to act that we experienced at the turn of the millennium if we are to achieve the Goals by 2015.

Yesterday we celebrated the first Nelson Mandela International Day. Madiba is a liberation icon. He is also an extraordinary individual. Through his personal ideals and sacrifice, he epitomizes the social equality and justice that is inherent in the MDGs. He also teaches us that for as long as we have political will and commitment we can achieve our dreams.

Mr. Secretary General,

We are here to provide you with our support. Over the last ten years, parliaments and the IPU have worked with increasing effect to help achieve the MDGs. Later today we will table a report setting out progress and identifying further steps we can take. As you will see, the IPU has not been resting on its laurels, and will be doing more in the months and years to come.

On my way to Geneva, I joined the women Speakers of Parliament in Bern. For the sixth consecutive year they met to discuss their role as women Speakers and leaders. At their meeting they debated in particular MDGs 4 and 5 on child and infant mortality and maternal health. I found their deliberations impressive and instructive.

This was my second such encounter, at which once again I benefited from their insights and vision for the future. Together the women Speakers share incredible experience, knowledge and insight into why countries have not made greater progress and what we need to focus our energy on. We are not lagging behind because the laws are not there, but because we continue to live in male-oriented societies dominated by stale mindsets and prejudices. Vision and leadership are needed in all countries and the women Speakers offer you their support as we redouble our efforts to create more equal and just societies.

Let me take this opportunity as well to congratulate you Mr. Secretary General for your vision and leadership. I commend you in particular for having achieved agreement to establish a United Nations body exclusively dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment, known as UN Women.

This is yet another area where the IPU with its expertise, network and political outreach can be of huge assistance to you. We look forward to establishing a very close working

relationship with this new body, building on our experience with UNIFEM, the Commission on the Status of Women, and other entities.

Mr. Secretary-General,  
Dear Colleagues

We are here to debate the major crises in the world, and to discuss how to improve the common good through greater accountability. We are here to discuss how we in our parliaments, individually, jointly and through the IPU, can work for greater accountability.

To achieve accountability, democratic institutions must be strong. They must resist the temptation to trim down the rules of multiparty democracy. They must weather the storms. That of course is easier said than done, and the IPU is there to help. As we will hear later at this Conference, the question of public faith in parliament and how to improve the performance of the legislature according to basic democratic criteria is something that, as President of the IPU, I take very seriously.

No parliament is the same. Our parliaments are all marked by distinctive traditions, all branded with the imprint of the past. But we must all accept that democracy is an ideal that is never quite perfected in practice and that it needs to be constantly reinforced through constructive criticism from within our parliaments and - why not - by our peers as well.

The theme of our meeting is securing global democratic accountability in a world in crisis. Over many months now we have seen the global economy reel from the aftershocks of an initial financial crisis. As if to underscore how vulnerable we all are, just last week a tiny imperfection in the latest cell phone wiped billions off a company's balance sheet.

It sometimes seems as if on the one hand we have governments, banks, lawyers and industries, and on the other there are people working heroically whose dedication is seldom rewarded. Ending these crises has to mean more than saving the economy. If the people are left out of the solution, there is no solution. Both the UN and the IPU are about "We the people". That is the vision and that is the challenge.

We must be ready to ask the real, often uncomfortable, questions. Sometimes it seems we have our priorities completely wrong. When you stop for a moment and think of the staggering amounts that countries spend purchasing weapons, large and small, you may well be justified in asking yourself if much greater security would not be achieved for all of us if a portion of the same amounts were spent on the people.

Likewise, corruption represents a clear threat to development. It diverts resources away from development, distorts market mechanisms, undermines the rule of law and destroys public trust. By working harder to ensure transparency and accountability and working more closely in support of national audit institutions we parliamentarians can do more to fight corruption.

In short, as leaders of our parliaments, we can do more. A year ago when the IPU met in this town to discuss the financial crisis, I said that the best kind of support we can provide to our governments is stringent oversight. That surely, is one service we can provide. To make sure that promises are lived up to.

When I say oversight, I mean the best kind of oversight. I mean scrutiny that is so searching that it leads to something being done. Holding government to account in the finest parliamentary tradition of doing the best we can for the people who elected us.

Of course, crises are not only triggered by natural disasters or dysfunctional financial systems. We know many others. Food crisis, climate change, man-made disasters, the list is potentially endless.

Organized crime is on the rise and terrorism continues, seemingly unabated. Let me take this opportunity to say that the IPU absolutely and unequivocally condemns terrorist acts wherever they occur. I declare the IPU's solidarity with the people and governments of Uganda, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Iraq, which have most recently born the brunt of these cowardly and inhuman acts.

These acts of terror constitute clear threats to peace, democracy and freedom. We can do much more in our parliaments to ensure that policies and laws are in place to implement existing international agreements and that this fight does not take place at the expense of fundamental human rights and freedoms. We should also pay greater attention to the need for our governments to reach an early agreement on a comprehensive convention on international terrorism.

Another complex area of crisis concerns nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The IPU welcomes the call for a nuclear-free world made at the recent NPT Review Conference in New York. The IPU has endorsed your five point plan, Mr. Secretary-General, and we are committed to work in tandem with you to mobilize the much needed political will in support of an early agreement to rid this world of the scourge of nuclear arms.

Our role as parliaments is to bridge the divide. It is to reiterate, as long as it needs repeating, that the common good must come first. And where governments are not able to talk to each other, our role in keeping the channels of dialogue open can be crucial.

That is why for the last ten years we have been building bridges between the multilateral and the local, by helping to bring the agenda of a tormented world, the business of the United Nations, back home to the parliaments. There will be no new multilateralism without democracy at its core. And there will be no democracy without strong parliaments.

Mr. Secretary-General  
Fellow Speakers  
Ladies and gentlemen

I want to conclude my remarks by returning to where I began. The Millennium Declaration sets out a vision for how we can together create a better world. The heads of State and government at the time recognized that parliaments and the IPU must be essential parts of the strategy for attaining that vision.

In the last ten years we have made progress; even considerable progress. But we also have a long way to go. I am convinced that in today's globalized world our parliaments can bring something unique to international cooperation - a deeper understanding of the inner workings of democracy.

I do not advocate a role for parliaments inside the United Nations, but rather strengthened cooperation through the IPU. That is also why I ask for your support in achieving a strong relationship between the United Nations and the IPU.

Parliaments, and the IPU, can do much to support the accountability that is at the heart of the global agenda. As President of the IPU I call on you all to assist us in forging a strategic partnership with the United Nations at the service of people everywhere.

Because of the role I have been privileged to play to help give birth to the Millennium Declaration, I feel maybe more than most a sense of responsibility for its fulfilment. I also know that it will not happen by itself. It needs all of us working together over the next five years if we are to stand there, in 2015, and proudly proclaim that we have met the Millennium Development Goals.

That is always why I feel so passionately about the need for us in parliament and in the IPU to rise to the occasion. As we debate these subjects, I hope, my dear colleagues and friends, that we find we are speaking with a common voice. I thank you all and wish you a successful conference.

Thank you