The Universal Declaration of Human Rights sixty years on: achievements and challenges

Seminar for members of parliamentary human rights bodies
Geneva, 3 - 5 November 2008

Geneva, 28 July 2008

Dear Madam Speaker,
Dear Mr. Speaker,

As part of its efforts to strengthen the capacity of parliaments to promote and protect human rights, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has been organizing since 2004 a yearly seminar for chairpersons and members of parliamentary human rights committees. This year's seminar, which will take place from 3 to 5 November 2008 at IPU Headquarters in Geneva, will take a critical look at the achievements and the challenges that remain sixty years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights ushered in a new era of hope for respect of the inherent equality and dignity of all human beings. It set the course for the development of an impressive array of international human rights treaties and the establishment of numerous organizations to further their cause. It brought increased legitimacy to raising human rights issues worldwide and placed them firmly on the agenda of national governments and the international community alike. Yet, along with these remarkable achievements, the last sixty years have also underscored that - in the absence of political will and resources - full respect for human rights remains a commitment on paper. Economic, social and cultural rights in particular have long gone by the wayside. More recently, the fight against crime and terrorism has put a strain on fundamental rights, and there are some who feel that increasing claims for respect of cultural specificity appear to challenge the very notion of the universality of human rights.

The seminar will take a close look at these issues, first of all by analysing the international legal human rights framework which has been set up since the adoption of the Universal Declaration. In addition, the seminar should help identify concrete ways in which Parliaments can respond effectively to old and new challenges to the promotion and protection of human rights. A preliminary programme of the seminar is attached. The final programme will be sent to you in September 2008.
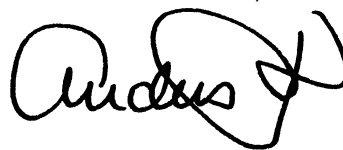
The seminar is organized in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. It will be open to members of parliamentary committees specializing in human rights and to those with a special interest in the issues to be discussed. The topics on the agenda will be introduced by members of parliament and/or experts and representatives of international and/or regional human rights bodies. As in the past, the emphasis will be on discussion, and everything will be done to leave ample time for a free exchange of views. Arabic, English, French and Spanish interpretation will be provided.

Please find enclosed an IPU registration form, which I invite your Parliament to return to our Secretariat no later than 12 September 2008. In this regard, I should inform you that the conference room at IPU Headquarters has limited seating capacity, which is why I kindly request your Parliament to limit its delegation to a maximum of three people, including advisers and secretaries.

Lastly, I would like to point out that participants should handle all matters relating to their visas, hotel accommodations and transportation. To facilitate hotel bookings, I am enclosing a reservation form which participants may wish to use. Please note that both forms, along with the provisional programme of the seminar and other relevant documents, will be posted on the IPU website in early August 2008.

I look forward to the participation of your parliament in the Seminar.

Yours sincerely,

Anders B. Johnsson
Secretary General

Encl.:   Provisional Programme
          Registration form
          Hotel reservation form