



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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IPU President's Statement

2017 Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations

Hon. Saber Chowdhury

New York, 13 February 2017

President of the UN General Assembly,
UN Under-Secretary General,
IPU Secretary General.
Excellencies, Fellow parliamentarians,
Ladies and gentlemen

I am very pleased to address you on behalf of the IPU for yet another joint IPU-UN Hearing, this time on oceans. The fact that we meet here at UN Headquarters in New York is testimony to the growing partnership that has evolved over the years between the IPU and the UN. I see this relationship as mutually reinforcing and beneficial and given the centrality of people in our work and focus, I am certain it will continue to broaden, deepen and strengthen.

We look forward to working closely with the new UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, himself a former parliamentarian, as we had with Mr. Ban ki-Moon.

Ocean comprises more than 70% of earth's surface and contains 97% of earth's water. As the principal components of Earth's hydrosphere, it is central and integral to all known life, forms part of the carbon cycle and influences climate and weather patterns. Ocean provides habitat for 230,000 known species but as only less than 5% of it has been explored, the number of species that exists is possibly over two million.

This issue is very close to my heart. As most of you know, I come from Bangladesh - a low-lying country where entire regions are at risk of disappearing under water as climate change causes sea levels to rise. It's estimated that up to 30 million of our people may need to move by 2050!

Many, including parliamentarians, have yet to fully realize the true significance of that vast expanse of water out there, literally down the river from this building.

We fly over oceans or look at them from the shore. We know intellectually that there is life below the surface but most of us neither interact nor pay much attention to it. As the saying goes - out of sight, out of mind. And yet, there are many issues that urgently need our attention and our power to make a difference in policy and in law.

Whilst many of us come from coastal areas that are most clearly dependent on the health of the oceans, many others represent in-land constituencies that seemingly have little

connection to the shore. We tend to overlook the interconnectedness of the health of the oceans, the health of the planet, and the health of our people.

I mentioned that Bangladesh could have 30 million climate change refugees in the next couple of decades. We are not alone. There are many countries that are in a similar situation – and of course there are places that will need to absorb these climate migrants. Beyond the human toll, there are also of course economic costs.

Our health as human beings depends on the ocean. As oceans and seas are more polluted with plastics, fertilizers, and all sorts of waste, the food chain is compromised, and millions are deprived of their livelihood. Fish provide nutrition to billions of people, and those fish must be free of disease.

Entire fisheries, and local economies, are rapidly disappearing. Some of this gap is compensated with fish farms, but how is the ecosystem disrupted as a result? Clearly, we need to address this problem from both production and consumption sides.

More and more oil, gas and other mineral resources are extracted from the seabed. We need to understand the damage this causes to marine life, and the impact on our efforts to combat climate change. As we know from experts, at least half of fossil fuels that are in the ground should stay in the ground. This situation is challenging enough within territorial waters; imagine the tension that will come from countries seeking to secure more of their fair share from international waters.

Oceans currently absorb a third of human generated GHG – 22 millions tons a day - and this has hugely benefitted us by slowing the climate change these emissions would have triggered if they had remained in the air. When carbon dissolves in the water, carbonic acid is formed leading to higher acidity affecting marine eco systems and the life cycles of many marine organisms particularly at lower end of food chain.

As the oceans continue to absorb more CO₂, its capacity as a carbon storehouse diminishes further. Thus, more of the GHG we emit will remain in the atmosphere, further aggravating global climate change. Oceans and seas are deteriorating. While some countries and communities have worked to safeguard ocean's ecosystem, so much more must and can be done – and urgently. This Hearing is thus very timely.

Sustainable Development Goal 14 demands our attention as legislators. This Hearing provides a golden opportunity for parliamentarians to understand the many issues that affect the oceans and share concerns and best practice. The summary of this Hearing will allow us to articulate a parliamentary perspective on this issue in the lead-up to the UN Oceans Conference here in New York at the beginning of June.

Most importantly, this meeting will raise our awareness and understanding of this critical issue and encourage and empower us to take action in our own parliaments.

For the IPU, this Hearing is another step in the long journey towards implementing the SDGs. Among the many activities underway, we have produced a toolkit, together with UNDP, to help parliaments assess their own capacities to mainstream the SDGs through their legislative and oversight functions. I encourage each one of you to use the toolkit and lead your colleagues through the exercise it proposes together.

Thank you.