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17th ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ASIA PACIFIC PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
Vientiane, 12 January 2009

STATEMENT BY MR. ANDERS B. JOHNSON,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to take the floor on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union at this 17th meeting of the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum. I would like to compliment you, Mr. President, and all our Laotian hosts for everything you have done to provide us with such warm hospitality in Vientiane. This most beautiful city will, I am sure, be conducive to a fruitful parliamentary debate.

We can never sufficiently emphasize the importance of the work that we carry out during these events. Members of parliament are not diplomats. Parliamentarians do not represent States and are not bound by the limitations imposed by formal diplomacy. You represent your own political views and those of the political parties that brought you to parliament. At the most fundamental level you give a voice to the people in your constituencies who have given you the confidence to represent them.

The range of experiences with which you are confronted as parliamentarians is very different from that of the diplomats. You will correct me if I am wrong, but I believe that human beings and their welfare are central to your concerns. You also have a flair for dialogue and understand the importance of compromise. After all, negotiation is the bread and butter of life in parliament. Moreover, you are familiar with the need to test new ideas and forge the sort of consensus which can subsequently find its way into more formal channels for diplomacy.

You will forgive me for labouring this point which is, no doubt, all too obvious to you. However, I think it is important that we remind ourselves that it is precisely these skills we need to bring to today's crises in the world.

We live in exceptional times. The world faces a succession of crises – climate change, the food crisis, the energy crisis, now compounded by financial and economic crises. In October 2008 the IPU Assembly debated the latest in this series of crises and called on parliaments to take an active part in addressing it. I fully expect that you will do the same during this meeting of the APPF.

Governments are of course already discussing these multiple crises and they are taking action. However, there is a growing realization that we have to improve on the prevailing economic model and that we need some new rules. We also need - to a greater or lesser extent - to refashion the international financial institutions.

The President of the United Nations General Assembly has set up a commission of experts to look into these issues and they will publish their report in about two months time. At about the same time, the G-20 group of countries will hold a meeting in the United Kingdom to try to advance solutions to the same issues.

Whatever agreements emerge from these processes will affect every single country for the foreseeable future. It is therefore essential that parliaments are kept informed and take an active interest in them. For this reason, the IPU will convene a global parliamentary conference in the first part of this year to examine the financial crisis and its ramifications.

One of the broader objectives of this exercise is for the parliaments to try to identify avenues for greater parliamentary involvement in providing oversight, transparency and accountability of the financial architecture, both at the national and the international level.

I am sure that you will be addressing this crisis in your debates and I would be very interested in learning from you how you think that we can achieve greater parliamentary involvement in and oversight of multilateral processes, the global financial institutions, and the financial markets. Let me also invite you to send strong delegations to the global parliamentary conference which the IPU will convene later this year.

Mr. President,

Just as I am sure that you will discuss the global financial and economic crisis, I am also convinced that the current emergency in the Middle East will figure prominently in your interventions.

The crisis in that region has escalated in recent weeks to frightening proportions. A few days ago, the IPU President, Dr. Theo Ben Gurirab, called

for an immediate ceasefire in the Middle East and for a return to the negotiating table. He invited parliamentarians everywhere to raise the matter in their parliaments and press for an early resumption of peace negotiations.

President Gurirab reminded the Israeli authorities and the leaders of Hamas that further violence will only bring more suffering to the Palestinian people and will not provide any greater measure of security for the Israeli people. President Gurirab also expressed concern for the steadily deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza and called for the embargo to be lifted.

I would like to take this opportunity to echo the President's call for dialogue. As he says, this is a matter of direct concern for parliaments everywhere. I do not doubt that repercussions of the most recent events have already been felt in a number of your countries. The situation remains extremely volatile. A crisis of these proportions will never be resolved by the use of arms. It is only through sustained debate and dialogue, which is precisely what parliaments exist to promote, that a settlement has any chance of emerging.

Mr. President,

Working closely with many of your parliaments, the IPU has helped develop a shared understanding of what we mean by a democratic parliament. Recently we published a parliamentary handbook on parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century which reports on this work. It identifies five core objectives which every parliament should pursue: namely to be representative, transparent, accessible, accountable, and effective in legislating and holding government to account.

Late last year we issued a toolkit to help parliaments undertake their own self-assessment of how good they are at meeting these objectives and to identify where they can do better. I would like to encourage you to make good use of this instrument which has been developed by the IPU to help your parliaments take ownership of democratization processes in your countries.

The IPU places special emphasis on helping countries emerging from conflict to make the transition towards stability rooted in democratic institutions. As part of this work, we are organizing a seminar in Phnom Penh in March, together with the Parliament of Cambodia, on reconciliation for the parliaments of this region. I hope that you will be able to attend this important event.

Protecting minority rights and ensuring that national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples are represented in parliament are difficult issues everywhere. Solutions will always depend on the particular circumstances of a given country. However, experience demonstrates that inclusive parliaments help to strengthen democracy, greatly improve the quality of political life, facilitate inclusion and participation within society and prevent conflict.

The IPU is seeking to gain a better understanding of the nature of the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament. To this end we are currently launching a new project which begins with a questionnaire to enable parliaments to describe the situation in their country. I would be very grateful if you could help us to make sure that your parliament pays close attention to this exercise and completes the questionnaire.

Mr. President,

I would like to end by encouraging you to strengthen cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. We are often told that this is one of the most diverse regions of the world, the implication being that it is particularly difficult to forge agreements and reach common understanding across such a wide and diverse spectrum of political, economic, social and cultural development. However, I am not sure of the accuracy of that perception.

I believe the countries in the Association of South East Asian Nations or ASEAN are demonstrating that much greater cooperation and even integration can be achieved. I encourage you to take inspiration from their example.

With these words I would like to wish you a fruitful and productive session.

Thank you.