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Statement by Anders B. Johnsson Secretary General, Inter-Parliamentary Union

*Durban Review Conference
(Palais des Nations, Geneva, 21 April 2009)*

Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

The declaration you are about to adopt reaffirms that democracy and transparent, responsible, accountable and participatory governance are essential to prevent, combat and eradicate effectively racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

The fundamental notion underlying the exercise of democracy is the acceptance – or better still – the respect of the other. Democratic life means both the right to differ and the acceptance of such difference by all. The point is to recognize difference and allow it to exist rather than refuse it or, as is all too often the case these days, demonize it in order to suppress it.

Political life is made up of confrontation. This is perfectly normal. The institutional mechanisms for managing public affairs are partly designed to channel conflictive or simply differing currents towards the single objective of ensuring common good. Democratic institutions exist to mediate tensions and maintain equilibrium between competing interests. It is only by talking to each other, that mutual understanding can take root and conflicts be solved in a peaceful manner.

It is therefore sad that several countries have chosen to be absent from this Conference and not to contribute to a highly necessary debate. Their absence is a setback for the victims of racism and racial discrimination. Their absence does not help create better understanding and more tolerant societies. And their absence rimes poorly with the renewed optimism which surrounds multilateralism today.

It is equally sad to see this tribune being used to polarize further an already divided world. Proclaiming the victory of right over wrong or us over them makes little sense at a conference which is held to celebrate our diversity and help build greater tolerance.

Mr. President,

In democracies, parliament is the institution that brings together the diverse opinions of society and channels this diversity in the political process. The parliamentary chamber is par excellence a place for compromise. It is the arena where political views are on display, where national policies are debated and where a common determination to take action can be forged. In short, it is precisely in parliament where societies can and should lay the groundwork for inclusive and tolerant societies free from racism and intolerance.

Recognizing the centrality of parliament in ensuring effective follow-up to the Durban Declaration and Plan of Action, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has organized numerous political debates on many of the core issues. We have drawn attention to the need to ratify the relevant international instruments, to amend existing legislation and adopt new laws to ensure legal equality and non-discrimination. We have undertaken capacity building in parliament on these issues and developed handbooks and other tools to help members of parliament take effective action.

There is hardly any aspect of the Durban agenda that has not been up for scrutiny at the IPU. We have addressed gender discrimination, racial discrimination, and xenophobia in relation to migrant workers, refugees and displaced populations, minorities, religious communities and beliefs, to mention but a few examples.

We launched a special project last year in which we have set out to map the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in political processes, much along the lines we have already done for several decades in relation to women and gender equality in public life. The purpose is to ensure inclusive political processes and parliaments that truly incorporate all sectors of society. We are working with national parliaments everywhere to use the International Day of Democracy on 15 September this year to underscore the centrality of political tolerance to democracy.

Mr. President,

Religion is often erroneously invoked as the cause of divide. Debates among members of parliament at a recent IPU Assembly demonstrated a clear consensus that of course all religions have made important contributions to civilization. Religions shape social and family organizations and internalize fundamental values that can help build more tolerant and respectful societies. Equally, the Assembly upheld the fundamental principle that whether or not people profess a religion is a matter of personal choice. It therefore called on all parliaments to make sure that such a choice is not punishable by law.

Freedom of expression and freedom of the press are twin pillars of democracy. They are freedoms which societies and individuals have fought for in the face of tyranny and oppression. Parliaments must protect these freedoms while enacting legislation which promotes the ethical responsibility that goes with these freedoms, particularly not to incite hatred, racism, xenophobia and human rights violations.

Freedom of speech is a right that parliaments cherish. Without it, there can be no true parliament. Not surprisingly then, parliaments are a deeply interested party to the debate about where free speech ends and reprehensible discourse begins. "If liberty means anything", George Orwell once wrote, "it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

Debates at the IPU on freedom of expression have concluded that the boundaries between the legitimate right to criticize and the abusive incitement to hatred and violence can not be defined uniformly, but that the aim of any law to curb hate speech must be to eliminate hate itself and to promote human dignity and understanding.

Along with the media, parliaments have not only a legal obligation, but also a moral and ethical duty to protect freedom of expression and to maintain a climate of mutual respect that is so essential to eradicating racism and racial discrimination. The IPU will continue to mobilize parliaments to take decisive action in support of these objectives.

Thank you.