



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

CHEMIN DU POMMIER 5
1218 LE GRAND-SACONNEX / GENEVA (SWITZERLAND)

TELEPHONE (41.22) 919 41 50 - FAX (41.22) 919 41 60 - E-MAIL postbox@mail.ipu.org

FIRST SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL *Geneva, 23 June 2006*

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

Mr. President,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to take the floor on behalf of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Let me start, Mr. President, by congratulating you upon your election to lead this Council. I look forward to working with you and members of this Council with a view to bringing a parliamentary dimension to this new United Nations body.

Mr. President,

Perhaps I should begin by explaining why I am speaking today on behalf of the organisation that brings together the parliaments of the world. To those of you who, like me, see it as only natural that parliaments have a role in the international body that seeks to promote and supervise the enjoyment of human rights, I apologise in advance.

There is every reason why parliaments and the IPU are natural partners for the Human Rights Council. Parliament ratifies human rights treaties and converts their provisions into domestic law. Recommendations issued by the treaty bodies or under your special procedures often require parliamentary debate and action. Parliament and its members monitor respect for human rights and curb abuses. Parliament adopts the national budget and can steer funds towards areas that are crucial to the enjoyment of human rights. Members of parliament are opinion leaders who can do much to raise public awareness and ensure that society is imbued with the values underpinning democracy and human rights.

The IPU has worked closely with parliaments on human rights issues for many years. We convene annual meetings of parliamentary human rights committees to examine specific human rights issues. We run a capacity building programme for parliaments in the field of human rights and, in cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, have recently produced a handbook for parliamentarians on the international human rights machinery and international human rights conventions and treaty bodies. The IPU works on truth, reconciliation and justice issues in the aftermath of conflict. Last but not least, the IPU

has a well-established mechanism for addressing human rights violations affecting individual parliamentarians.

Mr. President,

In September of last year, the IPU convened a Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliament at United Nations Headquarters in New York to discuss parliaments' role in international affairs. More than 150 Speakers and Presidents of Parliament pledged their support for United Nations reform along the lines proposed by the Secretary-General in his report entitled "In larger freedom". They also voiced a number of proposals whereby parliaments, working at the international level through the IPU, could provide support to the United Nations.

The heads of State and government meeting a few days afterwards endorsed the notion that the United Nations and national parliaments should strengthen their cooperation, including through the IPU, in a number of areas. One of these was United Nations reform. I therefore believe that we share a mandate to examine how parliaments can provide assistance to the Human Rights Council. Specifically, the IPU proposes that members of this Council give serious consideration to the possibility of some form of cooperation with parliaments. I would like to share seven suggestions to this effect in the hope that, collectively, we could think "outside the box".

First, the Human Rights Council will review State compliance with international human rights norms under a universal periodic review mechanism. Many parliaments do this in the course of their normal work. The IPU could assist the Council in collecting this information and, more generally, seek to mobilize parliaments to assist the Council. At a minimum, we could make sure that each parliament receives its respective country report and any views formulated by the Council so that it can be debated and, if required, acted upon. We could also ensure that parliaments are more generally aware of the work of the Council so that they can ensure national follow-up, including in the context of the national budget debate.

Second, the Human Rights Council may welcome a parliamentary perspective on specific human rights issues. The IPU would be ready to organize parliamentary scrutiny of a particular issue during a given year and then report to this Council. Such a report could provide valuable insights to members of the Council on the implementation of human rights norms.

Third, the next meeting of members of parliamentary human rights committees will take place in late September when your Council is in session. You may want to explore the possibility of interacting with these members of parliaments and, for example, have the President of the Human Rights Council address them and inform them of your programme of work and, in turn, invite them to address a message to the Council.

Fourth, the IPU takes special pride in its work to promote gender equality and partnership between men and women in public life. We have an enormous wealth of information and experience on this matter and would be more than pleased to share it with your Council.

Fifth, closer cooperation between the IPU and the thematic special procedures and treaty bodies may also be useful. The enforcement of the seven core treaties, for example, could

benefit from more systematic discussion in parliament of the national reports and recommendations.

In certain countries the national reports to international monitoring bodies first have to go to parliament for debate. Parliament ensures that the reports contain a wide variety of views, including those of civil society. To do this, parliament holds debates and public hearings, summons ministers and requests documents and reports from a wide range of departments and citizens. Members of parliament are also included in the national delegations to the international monitoring mechanisms so that they can better understand the recommendations that are subsequently made, and of course the parliament actively ensures that these recommendations are followed up and implemented at the national level. The Human Rights Council may well find this practise of great value.

Sixth, I would expect that, over time, the Human Rights Council will play a more active role than the Commission did on democracy issues. This is one of the fields in which the IPU has developed particular expertise and would like to contribute to the work of Council. The IPU has just published a study on parliaments and democracy in the twenty-first century which is based on work undertaken in more than seventy-five parliaments in developing and developed countries.

Seventh, the IPU is convinced that different United Nations bodies have much to learn from parliaments and the modalities of their work. Many parliaments have modernized their structures and working methods in recent years and the Human Rights Council could stand to benefit from that experience as it seeks to adopt new and more efficient procedures.

Mr. President,

I am convinced that the voice of the legislative branch of state should be heard in the deliberations of this body. The IPU is ready to lend its assistance to the challenging endeavour you have before you.

Thank you.