



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

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10th ANNIVERSARY OF DURBAN DECLARATION

Roundtable discussion on victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance: recognition, justice and development

United Nations, September 22, 2011

Remarks by the Honorable Dr. Theo Ben Gurirab Speaker of Parliament of Namibia, President of the IPU

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) put the theme of "human dignity" squarely back at the centre of our efforts to make the world a more tolerant and peaceful place.

The Declaration clearly recognizes the role of parliamentarians in the fight against racism. Indeed, many of the actions called for, be it the adoption of legislation, the ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, the creation of national action plans or the allocation of adequate funding to combat racism, fall to Parliaments. At IPU, we have endeavoured to inject the spirit of Durban into our work to support democracy and human rights around the world, focusing particularly on women, refugees, migrant workers, minorities, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities and victims of HIV/AIDS.

In this short time today, let me focus on a couple of aspects of the issue as it applies directly to parliamentary life.

The Durban Declaration was instrumental in highlighting not only Parliaments' institutional contribution in the fight against racism, but also in emphasizing the individual responsibilities of members of parliament. Because of their public outreach and status as elected representatives, politicians are uniquely positioned to set the tone for the creation of tolerant societies. However, we all know that politicians and their parties may resort to racist appeals to gain political mileage. Such remarks and actions, which often target members of vulnerable groups, in particular refugees and migrants, are unacceptable and undermine the very diversity which democracy intends to protect.

We will continue to call on parliamentarians to refrain from racist speech and to promote the message that parliamentarians have the responsibility to speak clearly and publicly of the need to provide a safe haven for those who face persecution back home and of the important contribution of migrants to growth and prosperity.

Fighting racist speech effectively goes beyond punishing or scolding those who make use of it. Measures to fight such speech must therefore be part of a broader strategy to attack the hatred which underpins this speech, and which is a denial of equality among human beings.

In truth, parliamentarians who appeal to xenophobic sentiments often do so because they think they reflect the sentiments of their electorate. Therefore, we must also change public attitudes through education. Parliamentarians have a responsibility to ensure that education promotes a culture of tolerance, understanding and equality and recognize that school curricula can play a decisive role in this respect. In particular, history must be taught in an objective manner. Again, members of parliament have a clear role as opinion leaders to promote respect for vulnerable groups among their constituents by taking the lead in facilitating an informed debate.

Thank you.