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Kampala (Uganda), 31 March to 5 April 2012



Governing Council  
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**REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS**

**(a) REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON NATIONAL AND REGIONAL DEFENCE AND SECURITY  
CHALLENGES IN LATIN AMERICA - THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS**

Bogotá, Colombia, 21-22 November 2011

Close to 50 participants, including parliamentarians from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago, participated in this regional conference, which was hosted by the Parliament of Colombia and organized in cooperation with the IPU and the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.

The conference focused on strengthening the contribution of parliaments to addressing national and regional defence challenges in Latin America. The event examined the current state of bilateral and regional cooperation on defence and security, with a special focus on the work of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Participants took an in-depth look at bilateral and regional cooperation in tackling cross-border organized crime. The meeting also looked at case studies, which provided interesting lessons on how to enhance such cooperation. Participants focused on the European experience and the experience of Argentina.

A special segment of the seminar addressed the challenge of strengthening security at the national level. Participants discussed the functioning of their national security sector and the effects of organized crime and violence. They also examined how best to rebalance the roles of the military and other security forces, and how to deal with the continuous expansion of the private sector as a guarantee of private security.

Another important session was devoted to parliamentary mechanisms and practices related to the security sector. It dealt with the powers and resources of parliamentary defence committees and the budget as a key tool of democratic governance. Special attention was paid to conducting intelligence work and the requirements for and obligations of parliamentarians' access to confidential information.

Participants concluded that there was a much greater need for qualified parliamentary oversight of security issues, including in the area of defining the national security policy. At the same time, participants emphasized that parliaments' function of exercising civilian oversight of security policy was neither exclusive nor exclusionist. Parliament was not the only institution in a democracy that could hold public servants to account. However, in the particular area of security, parliaments played a crucial and irreplaceable oversight role.

A premise underlying much of the discussion was that parliamentary authority, as defined in the laws, was often not in fact exercised in parliamentary practice. Although great interest was taken in a parliament's constitutional and legal authority, one tended to overlook the realities of concrete parliamentary practice, where reforms had often proved insufficient for parliaments to actually carry out constitutionally or legally authorized forms of oversight.

Lastly, participants recommended that parliaments be better equipped to perform their oversight function. This required that they reform, modernize, and streamline their procedures, methods of communication, and relations with other branches of government and other actors in society.