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REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE IPU ON HIS ACTIVITIES SINCE THE 193rd SESSION OF THE GOVERNING COUNCIL

Since our previous Assembly, I have been on several missions to represent the IPU in my capacity as President of this organization. Over the months I have remained in close contact with the Secretary General, consulting with him on various matters affecting our organization and global issues. I have also been in regular contact with the Director of Support Services, and have overseen all steps of the selection process for the next Secretary General.

I travelled to New York on 11 November, where I spent the day working alongside the Secretary General to prepare for two landmark IPU events – the 8th annual Meeting of Women Speakers of Parliament and the annual Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations. That very evening I attended a dinner in honour of the Women Speakers and the following morning, I officially opened their 8th annual Meeting and delivered a welcome address.

The event was organized around the theme *Gender equality – A sine qua non for SDGs*, with its outcome meant to feed into the Parliamentary Hearing. Lamenting the fact that today only 15 per cent of parliaments were presided over by women, I underscored the significance of meetings such as theirs, which multiplied women's individual capacity to wield influence. That collective influence ultimately impacted on decisions taken at the global level.

An important lesson could be drawn from the experience of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), where parliaments had not been consulted when setting the goals, with the resulting difficulties in implementing them. This time round, as the successor Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were being hammered out, parliaments made it clear that they wanted to be involved from the very outset.

I expressed the great pride I felt to stand at the helm of an organization that has been advocating and working for gender equality for several decades. Could we seriously conceive of sustainable development without guaranteeing unconditional respect for the fundamental rights of both men and women? Without gender equality? For the IPU, good governance necessarily implied the equal participation of both men and women in running public affairs. I concluded by suggesting that a novel way of measuring the democracy deficit could be against the benchmark of gender equality.

On 14 November, I attended the opening of the annual Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations. I delivered a welcome address in which I likened our efforts to achieve sustainable development to inspired music composers, who had only a plan and insufficient time to carry it out. I urged politicians, diplomats and all people to look beyond their narrow interests and focus instead on the common good for all.

I asked the participants if we could continue to live it up while billions continued to go hungry and homeless, with their basic human rights like education and health denied.

I also asked them if we could continue to regard the planet and our fellow human beings as disposable in the vain pursuit of material consumption and accumulation. Surely there was more to life and well-being.

I sent a clear message to the United Nations on behalf of the IPU and the parliaments of the world – we are here to stay. Not just in the run-up to the SDGs but for the long haul. I underscored that a global agreement was worthless if it did not gain the support of parliaments around the world. They were the ones that held governments to account, stimulated public debate and approved the necessary budget appropriations. Parliaments must be involved from the very beginning.

On 13 November, I was immensely proud to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Moroccan Parliament in Rabat. The pride I felt was double in that I addressed that august gathering not only as President of the IPU but also as a former Speaker of the House of Representatives.

I lauded our organization which, since its inception in 1889, has provided a unique forum of exchange for parliamentarians across the world. I welcomed the important role which the Moroccan Parliament has played and continues to play in the IPU, notably its contribution to the establishment of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean (CSCM) in the 1990s, which led some years later to the creation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM).

I remarked that one of the greatest challenges facing the parliaments of our day was their relationship with their electorate. Insofar as parliaments represented citizens, their legitimacy derived from the trust that those very citizens placed in them. As highlighted in the 2012 *Global Parliamentary Report*, a joint IPU-UNDP publication, the relationship between parliaments and citizens evolved in tandem with changes in society. Citizens had high expectations of their representatives and, in turn, parliamentarians should listen to their electorate and provide them with tangible responses. I urged all parliaments to be ever vigilant, ensuring that they were always at the service of their people.

I pointed to the good work the IPU had conducted and continued to do in the area of standard-setting, specifically criteria for democratic parliaments. Democratic parliaments must be representative, accessible, effective, transparent and accountable. There was growing interest among parliaments to evaluate their performance and the IPU had developed relevant tools to that end. It also encouraged parliaments to assess their level of gender sensitivity through yet another tool it had developed.

I stressed the need to guarantee political tolerance and women's participation in politics, both of which were sine qua non for inculcating a truly democratic culture. In Morocco, women currently accounted for 17 per cent of members of the House of Representatives. Indeed, I acknowledged that while the road to gender equality was very long and winding, it was our duty, as parliamentarians, to support and even initiate change in our societies.

On 6 December, on learning of Nelson Mandela's passing, I paid tribute to the colossal figure. I praised the man known as Madiba for his courage and visionary leadership and most of all, for his human approach to politics. The IPU stood with the entire world in celebrating a man who will inspire generations to come.

At the invitation of the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates, I attended the Parliamentary Media Forum in Abu Dhabi on 16 December. I was accompanied by the Deputy Secretary General, the Director of Communications and the Senior Adviser on Middle East Affairs. In my opening remarks, I welcomed MPs and journalists and urged them to collaborate ever closer in a bid to deepen democracy and establish a sound parliamentary culture in the region.

I underscored the role of social media in bringing parliament to the people and keeping pace with political and social changes. Such media provided MPs with a powerful tool to foster public engagement on democracy and decision-making. Nevertheless, only a small percentage of parliaments and parliamentarians were currently present on social media. With the IPU's technical support, the gathering made recommendations for the development and improvement of parliamentary media and information in order to appeal to a wider audience.

In my New Year message to our Members, I reflected on a year marked by immense difficulties for people all over the world. Conflicts raged on, terrorist attacks had been perpetrated and natural disasters continued to affect millions. Economic austerity was placing an enormous strain on countries and inhibiting their ability to achieve the MDGs.

Yet there had also been positive developments – continued commitment to multilateral cooperation and some advances in trade and in curbing the proliferation of small arms. Furthermore, an inclusive process was underway for developing the future sustainable development agenda. I appealed to all stakeholders to work together to place democracy and democratic governance at the heart of that agenda. I noted that while much progress had been made in guaranteeing universal suffrage, gender equality and human rights since our organization's inception in 1889, the goal of ensuring democracy for all was still far off. I looked ahead to 2014, when the IPU would be celebrating its 125th anniversary in myriad ways throughout the year.

I participated in the annual meeting of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU) held on 19 and 20 January in Kuwait. In my opening address, I stated that in spite of all the challenges democracy faced, it was not a pipe dream. Democracy was real and was the ultimate goal to which all nations aspired. The Universal Declaration on Democracy, adopted by the IPU in 1997, was a major step aimed at placing parliaments at the core of democracy, while at the same time establishing a set of core principles and elements of democracy.

The strong ties between Arab parliaments and the IPU were clearly demonstrated by the active role the Arab Group played in the work of the IPU and its various committees. The purpose of adding Arabic as a working language of the IPU through the establishment of an Arabic website, in coordination with one Arab parliament, was to serve all Arab Parliaments, Arab-speaking parliamentarians and the Arab world at large.

On 27 January, I sent a letter to the National Constituent Assembly of Tunisia welcoming the adoption of a new Constitution, which “provided a firm basis for developing a modern democratic State”. Adopted by an overwhelming majority, the new Constitution was not only agreed by consensus but also represented the diverse groups and beliefs in Tunisian society. I lauded the development as “an enormous achievement”, noting in particular the inclusion of a provision guaranteeing equal representation of men and women in parliament and other elected institutions. I reiterated the IPU's readiness to provide any support or assistance Tunisia might require in order to make the Constitution a reality for all Tunisians.

In late January this year, I travelled to IPU Headquarters in Geneva for two important meetings. I presided over the deliberations of the First Meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament on 27 and 28 January. I was pleased to interact with the Speakers in attendance and to note their enthusiasm for the 2015 Speakers' Conference.

On the heels of that meeting, I also presided over the first meeting of the newly established Sub-Committee on the Future IPU-UN Cooperation Agreement, a body of the Executive Committee. The participants heard from the legal expert who had been commissioned to review the existing cooperation agreement and recommend different options. A lively exchange followed, with the members determined to place the IPU on a more even keel with the United Nations in any future cooperation agreement.

In my address to the Parliament in Tunisia on 7 February, I said that the IPU was honoured to join the Tunisian people in celebrating such a historical moment – ratification of the new Constitution. On behalf of the IPU, I wished the Tunisian people success as they continued to implement their roadmap for democracy. Massive social movements were taking place throughout the world, with people calling for a better life and a prosperous future for all. Those movements were based on the will of the people, and called for dialogue, consensus and most importantly, putting the national interest above political differences. One of the greatest challenges facing the future of the parliamentary democracy was the relationship between parliament and citizens. It was important for parliaments to build that relationship and deliver services to citizens while continuing to improve and find more creative ways to fulfil their core functions.

I attended the 9th annual session of the Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC) Conference in Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, on 18 and 19 February. In my welcome remarks, I appealed to all to help find a peaceful, political solution to the crisis in Syria. I stressed that such a solution must be driven by the Syrian people and based on dialogue and negotiation, rather than a military solution.

I saluted the positive developments that had been unfolding in international relations, notably in the area of nuclear talks. I encouraged the Islamic Republic of Iran and its partners to pursue the path of negotiation and dialogue and build on the interim agreement that had been achieved in Geneva in late 2013. Lastly, I urged all parliamentarians to act always in the service of their constituents.