



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

137th IPU Assembly

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Inaugural address by the IPU President at the 137th Assembly

St. Petersburg, 14 October 2017

His Excellency, the President of the Russian Federation, Mr. Vladimir Putin,
Hon. Speaker of the Council of the Federation, Ms. Valentina Matvienko,
Hon. Speaker of the Duma, Mr. Vladimir Volodin,
Representative of the UN Secretary-General,
IPU Secretary General, Mr. Martin Chungong,
Distinguished Speakers / Deputy Speakers of Parliament,
Fellow parliamentarians, Special guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamalaikum and Dobryi večer! Ya ochen rad oka-zat-sia vuh Sankt Pétérbourgué!
[Good evening. I am delighted to be in St. Petersburg!]

It is my honour and distinct pleasure this evening to welcome you all to our 137th Assembly in this truly enchanting and historic city of St. Petersburg, the imperial capital of Russia for two decades, founded by Tzar Peter the Great in 1703. It is also the city where first State Duma convened a session in 1906.

IPU, the global organisation of national parliaments, through its membership represents the interests and well being of over 6.5 billion people across the world. Today the world has indeed come to St. Petersburg and we greet the people of this great city and the Russian Federation on the occasion of this Assembly.

Allow me to thank our Hosts for the excellent arrangements, the generous hospitality and for the warmth of the welcome. Our gratitude in particular to His Excellency President Putin who issued a Decree to ensure that the preparations and arrangement for this Assembly are meticulous and we the Delegates feel at home.

It is a great privilege for all of us to be part of the largest ever IPU Assembly – in terms of number of foreign Delegates, number of attending countries and number of Speakers and Deputy Speakers – 837 delegates, 155 countries 86 Speakers / Deputy Speakers. This level and extent of participation is unprecedented and is an eloquent testimony to heightened importance of the work of the IPU. As Delegates many of you have travelled great distances to be here. Thank you for your presence.

There are also other reasons why this Assembly will be considered a defining one. First, the Membership of the IPU is at its highest ever. As of now it is 173 national parliaments and by the time we conclude our work on the 18th, we will have admitted three new members – Vanuatu, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and our Membership will increase to 176. We are pleased to welcome Observer Delegations from Marshall Islands and St. Lucia and are encouraged by discussions we have been having with a number of Parliaments in the Caribbean on possible Membership. We are indeed steadily moving towards our cherished goal of universal membership.

#IPU137

Another very important area where we have broken new ground in this St. Petersburg Assembly relates to waving of restrictions and enabling every one to attend. It is an unfortunate reality that in some cases there are travel restrictions amongst nationals of some countries on a reciprocal basis. The Russian Federation has honoured its commitments and issued visas to everyone who wished to attend, regardless of restrictions.

This is a victory for parliamentary diplomacy as it is important for parliaments and parliamentarians to dialogue with each other and visit each others countries and this is even more so when dialogue at the Government levels do not exist or is very limited.

Thank you Your Excellency President Putin for setting this towering example and for your solidarity with parliamentary diplomacy. We certainly hope this example will inspire potential Hosts of future IPU Assemblies to act in the same way, creating the necessary space for parliamentary diplomacy.

The St. Petersburg that we marvel at today was once only rivers, canals, swamps and marshy land and the best of architects, engineers, specialists and craftsmen from all over Europe (France, Italy, Germany, Scandinavian countries) were brought together to build this magnificent city. Today, we as Parliamentarians and elected representatives of the people have assembled in this same city, and are called upon to craft a better world and a better future for the people who have entrusted us with this sacred responsibility.

We aspire to a world free of violence and conflict, free of hunger and fear, and most of all, a world where all of us – irrespective of race, gender, political persuasion or sexual orientation – are equal in the eyes of the law. We are here to stand up for democracy, justice and equality.

The times we live in are indeed laced with dangers, challenges and opportunities and let me touch upon some of these briefly.

The world has of course made much progress - more children have enough to eat, fewer mothers die giving birth, a person born today is more likely to be healthy, live longer, and have access to greater opportunities than at any time in human history and cracking the genetic code promises to cure diseases that have plagued us for centuries.

The Internet can deliver the entirety of human knowledge spanning civilizations, centuries and generations to a young girl in the remotest village on a single hand-held device. An explosion of social media has given ordinary people more ways to express themselves.

We are more connected than ever before but this integration has been more economic and unfortunately, less as a global community.

The world is not in happy state and many of the people we represent are unhappy – there is growing inequality within and amongst nations (wealth of the world's richest 1% is equal to the wealth of the other 99% of the global population), indiscriminate terrorist attacks are on the rise, new theatres of conflict are emerging and a changing climate is wreaking havoc.

90% of the disasters in the world today are climate induced and these as per World Bank estimates cost the world US\$520 billion every year and force 26 million people into poverty every year.

We need to switch in emphasis from disaster management to disaster risk management. This requires understanding risk, investing in resilient infrastructure and enhanced preparedness. What we invest today in resilience will always be less than what we spend tomorrow for recovery / disaster relief.

Over 65 million people have left their homes not because they have wanted to but because they are forced to do so. Just in 2017, over a 100 million people (majority of whom are women and children) need humanitarian assistance to the tune of US\$23.5 billion. The devastation caused by recent hurricanes in the Caribbean will push this figure higher and these losses will continue to mount as these hazards in crease in intensity and frequency in the future.

There is absolutely no justification for terrorism and yet it is an ugly reality of today, destroying societies and destabilizing regions. It is not enough to have only a security response. We must do more to address the roots of radicalization – unresolved conflicts, real and perceived injustices, high levels of unemployment and grievance among young people, marginalization etc.

As we meet here in St. Petersburg, the latest human tragedy is unfolding in Myanmar. It is staggering in its scale and rapidity. In just the past few weeks, well over half a million Rohingyas people have crossed the border into southern Bangladesh, making it the world's fastest developing refugee emergency. A vicious cycle of persecution, discrimination and violent repression has led to this mass exodus, putting regional stability at risk.

The number of hungry people in the world has increased for the first time since the turn of the century, sparking concern that conflict and climate change could be reversing years of progress. In 2016, the number of chronically undernourished people reached 815 million (60% of them are located in countries affected by conflict), up 38 million from the previous year.

A new expert report exposes the massive global burden of childhood violence – a preventable but nearly universal phenomenon that affects 1.7 billion, nearly 3 out of 4 worldwide with catastrophic impacts on individuals, communities and societies. It affects children in every country, rich and poor, north and south.

Ending violence in childhood and freeing children from fear is the world's single largest investment opportunity to enhance children's capabilities and build peaceful societies. The annual financial cost of physical, sexual and psychological violence against children is estimated to range between 2 and 5 percent of global GDP, or about US\$ 7 trillion.

Violence in childhood is also linked with violence against women. Children who witness their mothers being abused are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of abuse when they grow up.

Prevention is thus key when it comes to disasters and conflict. It must also be better integrated into our development and human rights work. When people can live decent lives – when rights are respected – when rule of law is present in everyday life – it is harder to turn societies to conflict.

Tensions run high in many hot spots around the world and are close to tipping point in the Korean Peninsula, where nuclear threat is at an all time high. The devastating humanitarian impacts of a nuclear explosion, whether by design or accident, cannot be controlled in time and space.

The mere thought of use of nuclear weapons should be unthinkable and the threat of their use can never be condoned either. We at the IPU along with PNND continue our work for a nuclear weapons free world. Parliamentarians from nuclear weapon states have a special responsibility to lead.

Democracy is coming under assault in many countries and regions – whether it be the ruling party trying to marginalise the opposition or the Executive not allowing the legislature to play its due constitutional role and the human rights of parliamentarians are under attack.

We must not lose sight of current trouble spots and challenges - such as the Israel Palestine issue where we continue to strongly advocate for the two nation solution - simply because other events make tomorrow's headlines.

And so, through the platform of our Assemblies and the many bilateral opportunities it presents to you and to us, we hope to place parliamentary diplomacy at the service of some of these troubled areas and to foster dialogue and understanding.

In this respect, the Executive Committee's Working Group on Syria has held its first meeting, the Committee on Middle East Questions will be exploring projects of peace and the Group of Facilitators for Cyprus will be holding another round of discussions. I should also tell you that the Executive Committee is following developments very closely in Cambodia, the Maldives, Venezuela and Yemen, among a long list of other countries.

All these disturbing facts and trends have to be seen in context of Agenda 2030 with its focus on people, peace, prosperity, planet and partnerships and world leaders agreeing in 2015 to chart a bold new vision to transform the world and leave no one behind.

For the General Debate, we have an inspiring theme: *Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue*. Two words stand out for me in this title: peace and dialogue. Why? Because these words, these values, these aspirations, are at the very core of work of the IPU.

As many of you know, the IPU was founded back in 1889 by two visionaries who dreamt of a world without conflict and war – a world of peace – which could be achieved through political dialogue. These values still hold true today and are as relevant and as important as ever.

It is interesting to look at the UN Charter – the word “war” appears 5 times and “peace” 47 times. It is high time we win the peace, instead of the war.

Fellow parliamentarians,

I am proud of the strategic partnership we have built with the United Nations, which recognizes us for the immeasurable parliamentary contribution we can make and are making to all of its global processes.

We are greener at the IPU, have returned to our core business of peace and democracy, while keeping up with the times by updating our look and our appeal to our Members.

We have a new website and a television platform – IPU TV - to communicate to our Members in more languages today than ever before. We also have more women and more young people in our midst.

I have all long advocated for and promoted linkage between science, technology, innovation and policy-making and my visit two years ago to the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) was an eye opener. It is now good to see that the IPU has developed a partnership with CERN I hope we will be able to articulate that nexus more clearly in the future.

On a personal note, this Assembly in St. Petersburg represents the end of my three year tenure as President and I will be handing over the baton of IPU Presidency to a new President that you will be electing and I am delighted that it will be a woman. I have tried to run my leg of the relay with speed and agility and have devoted myself fully to the organisation’s growth and vitality. I believe leave the IPU in better shape than what I had inherited and I am sure my successor will do likewise – as has always been the case.

IPU is a unique, fantastic organisation. It is a great leveller, all members have equal rights and there are veto powers. The extent of influence a Member has in this organisation is determined not by its size or population or its economic prowess but by the depth of its wisdom and the power of its actions to promote and uphold the values of the IPU.

So whether you are the largest country in the world or a small island state, you have equal votes – the same principle that we also see in the Russian Federation where Moscow the largest administrative region has two representatives in the upper house as does Nenetskie, the smallest unit.

Trying to achieve social cohesion at a time when societies are fragmented and the political discourse is increasingly polarized and divisive is no easy task. Parliamentary leadership has to rise to the occasion.

So dear Members, whilst we have achieved a lot together, we still have a long way to go. Steep challenges lie ahead for parliaments and for democracy, We must be ever vigilant and guard and protect our institutions. As an Organization, the sky is the limit for us and I am sure that we will move from strength to strength if we all work as one towards a shared vision for the IPU.

As I move towards the end of my speech, let me say that other than the record participation this Assembly has attracted, I hope and expect this Assembly will be also memorable for the quality of our debates and deliberations. I wish IPU's 137th Assembly all the very best.

Believe at all times that we as MPs have the constitutional mandate and ability to change people lives and let us never underestimate our ability to do so. "The time is always right to do what is right" (Nelson Mandela)

Remember, at IPU, we do not only talk, we act. We do not only say, we show. We do not only promise, we prove and we do not only preach, we practice.

I conclude in a spirit of gratitude and humility for the trust you have placed in me as the 28th President of this great institution to serve the world's peoples, you as MPs and the institution of Parliaments.

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