



## **Panel discussion on *Parliaments, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation***



**New York, 13 June 2008  
United Nations Headquarters**

### **SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS**

The panel discussion was organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in cooperation with the Peacebuilding Commission.

#### **Opening Remarks**

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► **Mr. Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union** provided opening remarks. He welcomed the participants and introduced the panelists.

► **H.E. Mr. Yukio Takasu, Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations, Chairman of the UN Peacebuilding Commission**, opened the discussion expressing the conviction that durable peace is linked to a viable political framework. He noted that Parliaments and political parties are essential institutional structures in the process of building and consolidating peace. Parliaments provide a legitimate channel for identifying and meeting popular demands; they hold the government to account and mediate among conflicting interests in society through peaceful means.

Looking at the challenges facing countries emerging from conflict, Ambassador Takasu noted that there is a need for the international community to assist in developing a culture of shared responsibilities among minority and majority political parties, building capacities for the key institutions of governance (including Parliament), and ensuring the freedom of the press and of academia.

As far as the Peacebuilding Commission is concerned, it holds a distinct convening power, enjoys the legitimacy conferred by its institutional links with the General Assembly, the Security Council and ECOSOC, while at the same time ensuring national ownership of proposed projects and initiatives. As part of its integrated and coordinated approach to peacebuilding, the PBC seeks to engage with relevant stakeholders, including the IPU, and mobilize substantive support for peacebuilding initiatives. Cooperation with international financial institutions, as well as with regional organizations such as the European Union, is of particular relevance in this regard.

## Keynote Addresses

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► **Dr. Frene Ginwala, former Speaker of the South African Parliament**, began by stressing that peacebuilding and reconciliation are fluid processes in which all the components are constantly changing and the entire society is in transition.

Conflict resolution is a long term process where many issues are referred to the legislative body for consideration and action, such as the question of amnesty, the new electoral system, civilian oversight of the security sector, or representation of vulnerable/minority groups in parliament. Unfortunately, the institution of parliament is not always equipped to meet the expectations conferred upon it.

After a cease-fire – the term cease-fire is more accurate than the end of a conflict as the peace negotiations are only the beginning of a long-term process- parliaments should be established and all political parties should abide by the election results, which reflect the will of people. Nevertheless, parliament is often confronted with the dominance of the executive branch of government, to the detriment of a strong and functioning parliament where all voices can be expressed, heard and taken into account.

In this connection, Dr. Ginwala emphasized the access of women to political processes. One cannot claim to have a representative Parliament if the grievances and specific concerns and contributions of one half of the nation's population cannot be heard. Democracy is a continuous process, not an event that comes with the elections once every five years. True democracy presupposes a balance whereby decisions are taken by the majority, while taking into account the views of the minority.

Very often, extensive training is required for new members of parliament. Parliament cannot seriously exercise its budgetary function, for example, if its members do not have the capacity to read, interpret and adjust a national budget. Donor support and technical assistance becomes very important here.

Dr. Ginwala ended by referring to the case of reconciliation in her own country, South Africa. The word "reconciliation" is used many times as a panacea, but the real question is with whom do we reconcile and why. Truth is very important. In South Africa, individual justice and reparation was impossible after 300 hundred years of suffering, so they settled for justice to the nation. The solution that was ultimately found involved full disclosure, amnesty, and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Truth and reconciliation are indeed of crucial importance, but one needs to understand that it is a long-term process.

► **Senator Rosario Green, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Mexican Senate, Former Foreign Minister of Mexico**, shared the conclusions and recommendations of the IPU sub-regional Seminar that took place last May in El Salvador on the role of Parliaments in the reconciliation and democratization processes in Central America (full text available at <http://www.ipu.org/splze/salvador08.htm>).

Senator Green said that the roots of conflict in Central America are political, economic and social. Even though the peace process, held at the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's, helped overcome the conflict itself, the promise of socio-economic progress for the people has not been achieved, and violence persists in many parts of society. "The guns are not silent in Central America", she stressed.

Senator Green asserted that Central American societies are still suffering, and as such Parliaments have a strong responsibility to address their grievances. Participants in the San Salvador seminar stressed that a new socio-economic agenda or "social" Esquipulas III should be developed by Parliaments in order to focus on issues such as health and education, as well as on other key areas such as taxation and budget implementation. Fiscal agreements need to be developed with a clear understanding of their social implications and shaped on a solid human rights foundation.

The Seminar participants had also emphasized a loss of faith in political parties, and hence also a democracy deficit in Central America. Senator Green stressed that political parties should be strengthened and democratized from the inside. Parliaments should establish clear rules on the financing of political parties, so as to avoid, for example, money from drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime polluting the political and governance processes. In order to restore a clean and healthy political system, it may be necessary to finance political parties and election campaigns from public funds, rather than from non-transparent private contributions. The integrity of members of parliament themselves is very important, as is the need to encourage the active participation and engagement of youth in the political process. Last but not least, the need for independent media channels should not be underestimated, as a vital tool to bring the undistorted messages of politicians and of parliaments to the public at large.

► **Senator Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, former President of Burundi**, focused on the situation in his country and how the Parliament is at the core of the national reconciliation process.

Since independence in 1962, Burundi experienced several episodes of exceptional violence, military coups and civil wars. The country has remained in a state of chronic underdevelopment and extreme poverty. The military coup and mass killing of both Tutsi and Hutu following the assassination of the democratically elected President in 1993 led to a civil war between Government forces and rebel groups. The National Assembly played an important role in overcoming critical situations, but it was also a victim of the crisis.

In the aftermath of the assassination it was impossible to elect a new president. The National Assembly intervened to amend the Constitution and indirectly elect a new President, but he too was killed in a plane crash in 1994. From 1994 to 1996 the Burundian Parliament was confronted with new problems, including the assassination of some thirty parliamentarians and the abusive trial of countless others. The 1996 coup d'Etat put an end to the legitimately elected parliament, and the legislature was suspended.

The Arusha peace accords signed in August 2000 launched a transition period that continues to be characterised by tension. Despite this, the National Assembly has been seeking to play a constructive role. Some reforms have been made, such as the reform of the defence sector, and several innovations have been brought to the institution of parliament itself. As an example, the Senate of Burundi is composed of an equal number of Hutu and Tutsi members, along with representatives of minorities and former heads of State. By the Constitution, 30% of the members of the lower house are women

Today, Burundi continues to be confronted by many problems. The peace process is not complete and the transitional justice phase has been experiencing many delays. There is a lack of dialogue and cooperation among the political parties, which in turn bears a negative impact on the functioning of State institutions. Political parties themselves are disintegrating, and some Constitutional provisions now handicap the functioning of parliament. Tribal politics, compounded by growing poverty, threaten once again to derail the peace process.

Looking ahead, the Parliament of Burundi faces two main challenges: taking action and shaping a regulating body to deliver transitional justice, and secondly preparing for peaceful elections in 2010. Senator Ntibantunganya concluded his remarks by emphasizing the crucial need for the international community to provide assistance to the Parliament of Burundi as the key institution of democratic governance. There is also a very real need to assist the political parties as they prepare for the up-coming elections.

### **General Discussion**

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Chile, South Africa, Namibia, El Salvador and the Commonwealth Secretariat took the floor to put questions to the panelists and report on their own experiences and thoughts. All delegates agreed that building capacities for parliaments and parliamentarians is fundamental to a successful peacebuilding process.

In their responses, the panelists referred to the role of former combatants, healing the wounds of the past and bringing child soldiers and former combatants back into mainstream society. To this end, vocational training, integration into the regular army and even special pensions may be considered.

Security Council Resolution 1325 was recalled as it related to women, peace and security. Sexual violence against women and children remains a major concern, and the international community needs to address this scourge with renewed energy and commitment.

The principles of human security should be mainstreamed into all United Nations peacekeeping operations, especially when it comes to the training of personnel. The jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court must apply to all nations, without exemption.

Once again, the issue of financing political campaigns was raised, as a significant component of the peacebuilding process. Parliaments need to legislate and establish

rules and regulations to make sure that the money generated by drug cartels and organized crime is prevented from hijacking and taking over the political agenda. Corrupt parliamentarians need to leave the political scene if the credibility of democratic institutions is to be restored. And in relation to the media, self-control needs to be exerted, for a responsible media that is fully conscious of its formative role.

► **Mr. Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union,** closed the meeting by thanking the panelists and the participants for their attention and contributions to the debate. The panel discussion had provided many examples of the important responsibilities parliaments have in relation to peace-building efforts. After all, an elected parliament that represents all the sectors of society and that functions well can do an enormous amount of good work to heal the wounds of the past, address the causes of conflict and help build an inclusive society. It is precisely in parliament where conflicting visions for the future of the country can be debated and agreements reached for moving forward. It is essential that the international community understands well how these political processes in and around parliament work and that they are supportive of parliaments, including by providing them with the means they require to perform their constitutional role.

Mr. Johnsson expressed the hope that this first panel discussion would be followed by many other events and occasions to raise understanding and garner support for the parliamentary institution in countries emerging from conflict. The IPU was committed to assisting the parliaments in these countries and was already active on the ground in Burundi and Sierra Leone. The IPU had also developed programs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere for the consideration of the United Nations and was currently launching a major project on reconciliation issues benefiting nine parliaments in Africa.