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REPORTS ON RECENT IPU SPECIALIZED MEETINGS

PARLIAMENTARY MEETING AT THE XIX INTERNATIONAL AIDS CONFERENCE

AIDS in 2012: What will it take to stop the epidemic?

Washington, D.C., USA, 23 July 2012

The Parliamentary Meeting at the XIX International AIDS Conference was organized by the IPU in cooperation with UNAIDS. The four-hour meeting, which took place at the US Capitol Visitor Center, gathered about 60 members of parliament attending the XIX International AIDS Conference. This was the third time that the IPU organized a Parliamentary Meeting on the occasion of this event, the largest regular conference on any health or development issue.

The Parliamentary Meeting provided members of parliament with up-to-date information on issues related to the HIV epidemic. It served as a forum for an exchange of views on major issues, such as the translation of scientific knowledge of HIV treatment and prevention into policy and practice. It also provided parliamentarians with an opportunity to discuss the concept of shared responsibility for the AIDS response and the centrality of parliamentary leadership to that response. The IPU guide entitled *Raising the Profile of HIV and AIDS in Your Parliament* was launched at the meeting.

The Parliamentary Meeting featured the following presenters:

- Ms. Marleen Temmerman, Belgian Senator and Chair of the IPU Advisory Group on HIV/AIDS;
- Representative Jim McDermott, Co-Chair, Congressional HIV/AIDS Caucus, United States Congress;
- Ms. Jan Beagle, UNAIDS Deputy Executive Director;
- Ms. Annie Lennox, UNAIDS International Goodwill Ambassador;
- Mr. Ryuhei Kawada, member of the House of Councillors of Japan and member of the IPU Advisory Group on HIV/AIDS;
- Mr. Joel Nana, Executive Director, African Men for Sexual Health and Rights;
- Mr. Libby Davies, member of the House of Commons of Canada;
- Mr. Mohsen El-Hazmi, member of the Consultative Council of Saudi Arabia and member of the IPU Advisory Group on HIV/AIDS; and
- Ms. Pamela Nash, member of the House of Commons, United Kingdom.

The first session of the Parliamentary Meeting was devoted to the recent scientific breakthroughs on HIV/AIDS and the extent to which they drove parliamentary agenda-setting

today. It aimed to provide an answer to the question of how science and policy could be combined to respond to political challenges.

The meeting agreed that currently science and progress presented tremendous opportunities that must be seized if the world wanted the current decade to be the last one of AIDS. Most parliaments had recognized and supported implementation of scientific discoveries, particularly regarding treatment advances and expansion of treatment coverage. At the same time, however, parliaments in many countries lagged behind in making sure that their response to HIV was grounded in human rights. As a result, more than two thirds of countries had policies or laws that impeded access to HIV services by certain populations, including the groups most affected by the epidemic (injecting drug users, men who have sex with men and sex workers). The meeting concluded that the response to HIV would never be complete unless scientific breakthroughs overrode moral judgements.

The exchanges among parliamentarians showed that most countries struggled to meet the needs of and scale up funding for HIV programmes. Globally, funding for HIV/AIDS dropped 13 per cent between 2009 and 2010. The US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the largest health initiative ever initiated by a single country to address a disease, was currently being extended by one year only at the same level of funding. The Congress was struggling to guarantee a further extension. At the same time, most countries in the South remained overly dependent on international funding for HIV/AIDS. That posed a huge threat to the gains made.

The meeting concluded that in the current period of financial austerity, parliamentarians had to do a cost-benefit analysis and think in broader terms when discussing funding for HIV/AIDS. That was particularly important for country-level policy-making as countries started to assume greater responsibilities for their HIV programmes. However, parliamentarians should keep in mind that adequate access to services could only be achieved if supported by enabling policies, laws and mechanisms to ensure their implementation.

The meeting sent a clear message that everybody had a role to play in and contribution to make to the HIV response. Parliamentarians can: help reform health care systems to better respond to HIV/AIDS; approve funding to help prevent and treat the disease; reform laws to make it easier for vulnerable populations to be reached; and generally help ensure that the concerns of persons with HIV and other stakeholders are brought to the fore of national debates. In order to properly deliver on these important functions, parliamentarians should witness HIV first hand and familiarize themselves with the impact of HIV on the lives of people. That experience had changed the perspectives of many politicians, celebrities and others in the past, and had helped bolster the HIV response. Parliamentarians, as leaders in society, should be ready to take on that role.

The leadership role of parliamentarians required talking openly about HIV/AIDS, reproductive health and sexual education. In many countries, moral judgements and male-oriented culture were obstacles to education, particularly for women and girls. As leaders who help foster a common understanding in their countries, parliamentarians should play a pivotal role in fighting stigma and discrimination both at the policy and constituency levels. Informed members should do their best to educate their fellow parliamentarians and other policy makers in order to overcome the current moral barriers. That had the potential to prevent many future HIV infections. The IPU had an important role to play in fostering that debate.

The second session of the Parliamentary Meeting was dedicated to the launch of the IPU guide, *Raising the Profile of HIV and AIDS in Your Parliament*. The launch prompted a lively discussion about ways to raise and maintain the profile of HIV in parliament and cross-party collaboration on the issue.

The guide is the most recent IPU publication and was published in response to requests from many members of parliament who felt that parliamentary involvement in HIV/AIDS issues could be significantly strengthened through the establishment of specialized HIV cross-party bodies to provide impetus for action. It is intended to be a practical tool for parliamentarians who wish to organize themselves into cross-party groups and step up to the challenge that HIV presents. It is also designed for the civil society organizations that wish to work with them.

The guide was very well received among the parliamentarians attending the meeting. They described it as an excellent tool that offers best practices on working with civil society and people living with HIV, and one that has the potential to help parliamentarians who are struggling to keep HIV on the agenda. The meeting recommended that the Advisory Group use the Guide to engage more strongly with different parliamentary bodies dealing with HIV and the individual parliamentarians committed to the struggle against the epidemic.

Furthermore, the parliamentarians found that the guide offers many opportunities for leadership in terms of transforming HIV concerns into laws, budgets and oversight, and that the IPU should help parliamentarians seize these opportunities. They expressed the hope that the guide would also help open up channels of communication between legislators and the non-governmental sector, setting the stage for stronger collaboration between parliamentarians, civil society, persons living with HIV and relevant institutions at the national and regional levels.

Lastly, the meeting concluded that the strong parliamentary presence at the XIX International AIDS Conference was a sure indicator of the commitment of members of parliament to fight HIV/AIDS. The parliamentarians praised the IPU Advisory Group on HIV/AIDS for its work to keep HIV on the agenda of parliaments and help parliamentarians strengthen their capacity to respond to the epidemic. They encouraged the Group to continue lobbying in parliaments to repeal or amend laws that presented obstacles to effective HIV prevention, fighting stigma and discrimination and standing up and speaking out for the most disadvantaged groups. The IPU has strengthened international advocacy efforts against discriminatory policies and practices, and has opened the way for more effective parliamentary action to improve access to HIV services, combat discrimination and prevent infection. The HIV response can serve as a pathfinder for health, human rights and development movements, and the participants encouraged the Advisory Group to share those lessons in parliaments.