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Honourable Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliament,
Mr. Secretary General,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

Welcome to Geneva!

It is an honour to address you today in my capacity as Vice-President of the IPU. I bring with me the warm regards of our President, Dr. Tulia Ackson, who is back home in Tanzania engaged in her country's election campaign. I spoke with her recently, and she asked me to extend her best wishes for a fruitful and successful 151st IPU Assembly.

We meet once again in the home of the IPU, in a city whose very name has become synonymous with humanitarian norms and humanitarianism. As a proud member of the IPU Committee to Promote Respect for International Humanitarian Law, I feel particularly honoured to address you today on this critically important matter.

Just a short distance from where we sit, 80 years ago, States gathered in the aftermath of a war whose destruction spanned continents and claimed tens of millions of lives. They declared that even wars must have limits. Out of that devastation emerged the Geneva Conventions of 1949 – the keystone of international humanitarian law (IHL) – which have been universally ratified. And at the heart of these norms lies a very profound conviction: that human dignity must be safeguarded even in the darkest of times, and that this is a right owed to every single human being.

The very essence of IHL was – and still is – to limit the effects of armed conflict on people and their capacity to survive and live. Civilians should be allowed safe passage out of areas of violence and must not be the object of attack, used as human shields or held hostage. IHL also provides that humanitarian aid should be allowed in conflict areas and that civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools, must also be spared from attack. Prisoners of war and interned civilians must be treated with dignity and protected against ill-treatment and exposure to public curiosity.

Humanitarian norms act as a shield for those who bear no arms: but their reach goes further. These norms also place restrictions on the means and methods of warfare. Over time, humanity has come to recognize that there are limits and that certain weapons and tactics are just too inhumane to be tolerated and should be consigned to history, never to be repeated.

I think it is important for us all to recognize and acknowledge that, since the adoption of IHL norms, whether the Geneva Conventions or other related disarmament treaties and conventions, the suffering of millions of people has been reduced, and many lives have been saved.

Nonetheless, a quick glance at the headlines today reminds us that we must pursue efforts and do more to effectively enforce these norms.

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Dear colleagues,

A few days ago, the peace agreement in Gaza came into force and we all welcome this very positive development. But we must not forget that there are still around 130 armed conflicts being fought around the world today – a figure that has more than doubled in the last 15 years. This growing number of conflicts has caused a devastating impact and exacerbated humanitarian needs worldwide: almost 310 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in 2025.

Major humanitarian crises in countries such as **Sudan, Palestine, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Afghanistan and Myanmar** – to name but a few – have shown the civilian suffering caused by widespread killings, conflict-related sexual violence, destruction of civilian infrastructure, disruption of essential services, famine and displacement.

At the end of 2024, over 123 million people were forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations. The war in Sudan – the world's largest displacement crisis – has led to the displacement of 14.3 million Sudanese people and left almost 15 million children in the country lacking food, safe water, shelter and medical care.

In 2025, a total of 1.9 million people are in the grips of catastrophic hunger – primarily in Sudan and Gaza but also in regions of South Sudan, Haiti and Mali.

Those at the forefront of humanitarian action efforts have also not been spared from danger and suffering. In 2024 alone over 380 humanitarian workers were killed. Hundreds more have been injured, kidnapped or detained. There is reason to fear 2025 could be even worse, as 265 humanitarian workers have reportedly been killed in just the first eight months of this year.

However, the roots of this dire humanitarian scenario globally go beyond conflict. The current climate crisis, disease outbreaks, widespread misinformation, geopolitical fragmentation and a contested multilateral system have all contributed to amplify the lack of compliance with IHL, which has led to unacceptable human cost.

Dear friends,

Let us never lose sight of the fact that behind these statistics there are real people. People like you and me, with dreams, hopes and aspirations. People who should enjoy the same basic rights as each of us in this room.

At this very moment, when civilians and combatants alike most need protection, humanitarian norms are being questioned, threatened and cast aside. At the same time, humanitarian aid is being defunded and humanitarian action is being increasingly challenged, with growing difficulties in terms of access and security for humanitarian workers.

So what can we do within our Parliaments and countries, and as the global parliamentary community?

I would like to make three suggestions:

First, I would like to stress the importance of prevention and the need to act, well before any conflict erupts, to prevent violations of IHL. It is difficult to think of war during peacetime but this is exactly when we need to act. Prevention means putting in place systems that will enable enforcement and respect of IHL rules before, during and after conflict. Preventing lack of compliance with IHL includes carrying out reforms to anchor IHL in our legislative frameworks; ensuring IHL training and dissemination within the armed forces and among the general public; promoting educational and awareness-raising campaigns; and establishing specific oversight and monitoring mechanisms.

Second, rigorous enforcement is key. Humanitarian norms are not mere formalities; they represent the essence of a humane response to war. Ensuring enforcement of these rules through effective

accountability is essential. This involves not only setting up legislative and judicial systems before a conflict breaks out, but also supporting ongoing efforts by international and national accountability mechanisms. It is our responsibility to signal that we belong to a culture that does not tolerate disregard of humanity in war.

Third, let us always keep humanitarian concerns at the heart of our work. As decision-makers, whatever choices we are called upon to make, especially those concerning questions of security and war, we must ensure that the humanitarian dimension is never absent from the equation. Too often, humanitarian concerns are treated as an afterthought or excluded altogether from the debates we have on security issues. As representatives of the people, we are duty bound to approach these issues in a comprehensive way, with humanitarian objectives and principles at the heart of our considerations.

Colleagues,

Upholding humanitarian norms and supporting humanitarian action in times of crisis requires **courage**. And courage in politics means refusing to look away from suffering. Courage in politics means standing up for principles.

Despite the darkness, there are rays of light. The International Committee of the Red Cross regularly documents real examples of respect of IHL: attacks suspended when the risk to civilians became too high; medical convoys allowed through; detainees released and visited by Red Cross staff; restraint shown in the use of fire; routes chosen to avoid civilian areas; vital infrastructure spared. These accounts demonstrate that respect for humanitarian norms and effective humanitarian action during war carve out space for life, relief and recovery.

And then of course, last week we witnessed the release of the last Israeli hostages and of many Palestinian prisoners and detainees, as a first step away from the brink and back on the road towards lasting peace and a two-State solution of Israel and Palestine living together side by side. Much-needed humanitarian aid is finally flowing into Gaza.

Dear colleagues,

To secure enduring respect for IHL and foster genuine support for principled humanitarian action, we must harness our collective political resolve. We must embrace inclusive decision-making, forge partnerships, and cultivate a shared understanding of what is at stake: **the defence of the most basic forms of human dignity**.

So let this 151st IPU Assembly be remembered for reaffirming that commitment. Let it show that across our differences, across our regions and our ideologies, we are capable of coming together to uphold humanitarian norms and protect principled humanitarian action.

Thank you.