



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

SPEECH: GENERAL DEBATE ON THE 151ST IPU ASSEMBLY THEME

***'UPHOLDING HUMANITARIAN NORMS AND SUPPORTING
HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN TIMES OF CRISIS'***

Honourable President Tulia Ackson

Honourable Speakers

Esteemed Colleagues

Distinguished Delegates

This year remains the year of Gender Equality and enjoins us to reflect the importance of promoting gender equality in our Parliaments and in our Nations. The theme of this general assembly is instructive in this regard because most of the time women, children and people with disabilities bear the brunt of discrimination and exclusion. We continue to assert that the rights of these constituencies are human rights that must be protected and upheld. In upholding humanitarian norms and supporting humanitarian action in times of crises demands of us to look out for those who are and remain vulnerable in our societies.

In so doing, we need to look at preventative measures that we must put in place before a humanitarian crisis emerges. In this regard, as the IPU family we have developed mechanisms including early warning systems that help us to intervene on such crises.

We gather today at a time when the world is once again reminded of the fragility of peace and the enduring importance of humanitarian norms. South Africa welcomes the continued peace initiatives to resolve the conflicts that continue in various regions of the world. We believe that dialogue is the cornerstone for finding lasting peace. We urge all parties to respect and uphold these peace agreements, not only as a political commitment but as a moral imperative. Too many lives have been lost, too many families torn apart. Let this be a turning point toward lasting peace and dignity.

South Africa's own history of overcoming systemic injustice and conflict has taught us that peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of justice, accountability, and compassion. Our commitment to international humanitarian law is rooted in our constitutional values and our lived experience. We stand in solidarity with all those who suffer the consequences of armed conflict and reaffirm our dedication to upholding humanitarian norms wherever they are threatened.

Honourable President

It is no accident that international humanitarian norms exist. They were born from the ashes of war, from the suffering of civilians whose lives were shattered by violence, displacement and neglect. These norms reflect a solemn promise made by the global community to uphold the dignity of every human being even in the darkest moments.

Yet today, we must ask ourselves: have we truly learned from the past?

International humanitarian law, the body of law that regulates the conduct of armed conflict and seeks to protect civilians, is under immense strain. In most

regions, we are witnessing violations that not only undermine the rule of law but also threaten the very fabric of human dignity.

The principles of distinction and proportionality, the cornerstones of International Humanitarian Law have been repeatedly disregarded. It is for this reason that South Africa, together with five other States and the International Committee of the Red Cross, launched the Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law. Indeed, the International Court of Justice and multiple UN bodies have raised concerns about war crimes and collective punishment. The dire situation of famine should be reversed through unobstructed aid delivery. This should be the case in all situations of both armed conflict and under foreign occupation on our continent and beyond.

The failure to uphold international humanitarian law is not merely a failure to honour legal obligations, but it is a moral failure! It is a failure to protect the most vulnerable, to preserve human dignity, and to uphold the principles that bind the international community.

This is where parliaments must act. Parliaments are not passive observers. They are the guardians of law, the voice of the people, and the architects of accountability. Through legislation, oversight, and budgetary authority, parliaments have the power to enforce international humanitarian law domestically and to hold governments and armed actors accountable.

First, parliaments must ensure that national laws are aligned with international obligations. This includes ratifying relevant treaties, criminalising war crimes, and establishing mechanisms for investigation and prosecution.

Second, parliaments must exercise robust oversight. They must demand transparency in military operations, scrutinise defense budgets, and ensure that

armed forces are trained in International Humanitarian Law principles.

Third, parliaments must advocate for humanitarian access. We must work with civil society and international organisations to remove barriers to aid delivery and protect humanitarian workers.

Fourth, parliaments must lead in translating outcome documents and summit declarations into tangible results. This includes advancing women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding, climate resilience, and adaptation strategies. Women are disproportionately affected by conflict, yet they remain underrepresented in decision-making. Parliaments must legislate for gender-responsive climate policies, support women-led initiatives, and ensure that women are at the centre of recovery and resilience efforts.

Honourable President

South Africa believes that the strength of humanitarian norms lies not only in their legal foundations but in their universal application. We must recommit to the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Words must be matched by action, and laws must reflect our value and principles.

Thank you.