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## STATEMENT ON THE GENERAL THEME

### OVERCOMING THE PANDEMIC TODAY AND BUILDING A BETTER TOMMOROW: THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS

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## **GENERAL THEME: OVERCOMING THE PANDEMIC TODAY AND BUILDING A BETTER TOMMOROW: THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS**

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The President of the IPU

Hon Colleagues,

The world has dealt with global pandemics and other crises before, but the COVID-19 crisis somehow came as a surprise to most countries and found many of our nations unprepared. In its wake, COVID-19 has not only taken lives, but has also caused unimaginable disruptions on livelihoods, economies, education and many other aspects of human life.

To slow the spread of disease, many countries are continuing to employ a set of global measures that include restrictions on interpersonal contact, assembly, and travel (i.e., social distancing); recommendations for sanitation, hygiene, and the wearing of masks in public places; rapid isolation of infected patients; and the use of personal protective equipment when treating affected patients.

According to the United Nations Volunteers Programme Regional Manager for the East and Southern Africa Regional Office, the eventual scope and consequences of this outbreak are uncertain at present as the condition is swiftly evolving. Given the vagueness about the further spread of COVID-19 and when it can finally be contained, there is therefore considerable uncertainty about the speed of return to normal life.

From what has been seen so far, the pandemic has profoundly transformed the manner in which human beings and organizations operate and conduct their business. Like many other organizations, parliaments, including that of Botswana, have not been spared from the disruptive effects of COVID-19. The situation did not only force parliaments to adapt to functioning in the context of the ‘new’ environment, but to figure out how they can play a meaningful role in terms of fostering efforts aimed at turning the challenges presented by the pandemic into opportunities to enable countries to be better prepared, now and in future.

Looking back from the period when the pandemic started, this has not, and cannot by any means be said to be an easy task. However in their supreme functions as law-making, representation and oversight bodies, parliaments should stand poised to play a key role in driving efforts aimed at developing strategies aimed at putting in place policies, systems, infrastructure and allocating resources required to respond to the pandemic.

Driving such efforts will involve parliaments having a critical role to play in tackling COVID-19 by assuring the health and socio-economic well-being of citizens. In particular, as parliaments consider resource allocation decisions specific to their national, economic, and social contexts, they should be looking at providing for the people's immediate livelihoods, such as their ability to maintain employment and afford their daily needs.

Noting that the majority of citizens that have been mostly affected include those in the retail, tourism, entertainment and the informal sectors of the economy, parliaments should among others, debate packages that will play an important role in ensuring peoples' longer-term wellbeing, and even their survival.

Obviously after so much devastation, the economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 for countries with small and developing economies such as that of Botswana, will not be rapid. This therefore means that as Members of Parliament oversee the response to COVID-19 now and for the future, proposals for packages and spending should primarily be aimed at meeting the immediate, medium and long term needs of the populations they serve and most importantly, to stabilize the situation.

Beyond that, they should at the same time also be looking at promoting transparency around funding surrounding COVID-19, which is key to maintaining the public's trust in the government's response to the pandemic. Promoting transparency will involve among others, MPs closely working with community leaders and utilising their Constituency offices to ensure that their constituencies receive the information they need, including official updates on the situation.

In Botswana, as it may be the case with many other countries, during the subsistence of the COVID-19 period, the focus of Parliament was redirected to the critical areas of enacting emergency laws to tackle the

pandemic; approval of supplementary budgets; budget reprioritization and oversight on government decisions and actions.

For example, parliament approved the mid-term review of National Development Plan 11, including a P14.5 billion economic stimulus package to support implementation of the Economic Recovery and Transformation Plan (ERTP) aimed at re-booting the economy and cushioning it from the effects of COVID-19.

Through parliament, a P1.3Billion government loan guarantee scheme was also approved to encourage lending to qualifying businesses by offering a partial Government guarantee of 80% to Commercial Banks against losses on qualifying loans to eligible applicants. The maximum facility to be granted for any one beneficiary is P25million, subject to the qualifying criteria.

Although in a situation like the current COVID-19 crisis one can never say enough has been done, generally, the Parliament of Botswana has played, and continues to play its part in terms of contributing to efforts aimed at dealing with the pandemic, both in the short and long term. Parliament continues to balance power, pass emergency laws where necessary and represent the will of the people. While in some cases the effects of its actions are aimed at addressing the current challenges presented by the pandemic, some will possibly be felt in future.

It must be indicated that actions taken by Botswana are still work in progress, but their essence are such that the rebuilding of lives, health systems and economies should be seen as a window of opportunity to fundamentally re-think the way 'things are done' and to address development challenges and promote sustainability and economic growth, going forward.

In conclusion, that the COVID-19 crisis is an example of one of those uncertainties that come about unexpectedly and currently the greatest international public health emergency in more than a century is not in doubt. Considering the magnitude and the devastating effects of the pandemic, parliaments, including that of Botswana should continue to distil lessons from this painful experience, and out of that, build strong response systems, policies and fall-back plans to cope with potential future crises.

In these very difficult times, where resources are limited and citizens' lives have been greatly disrupted, MPs in their wisdom should at all times, also

not only be aware of their constituents' needs but also make efforts to connect with them and effectively voice their concerns and priorities as well. Clear and factual information on the disease, its spread and mitigation strategies becomes vital and Members of Parliament are well placed to achieve that.

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