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Concept note for the General Debate

Parliamentary diplomacy: Building bridges for peace and understanding

Peace is more than the absence of armed conflict. It encompasses security, the rule of law, and the conditions necessary for individuals, families and communities to lead fulfilling lives and realize their socioeconomic potential. Peace is an end in itself, but it is also a fundamental condition for addressing global development challenges such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With this in mind, the IPU has chosen peace and international security as its strategic policy focus for 2024, and this General Debate will serve as the starting point for a year of action.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 56 States around the world were experiencing armed conflict in 2023. Political polarization and hate speech are on the rise. Technological advances, such as inexpensive and easily produced military equipment, cyber warfare, drone surveillance and artificial intelligence, as well as increased geopolitical competition and political instability, have resulted in more intense conflicts and a rapid rise in conflict-related deaths. Many conflicts violate a wide range of human rights, with parties frequently failing to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. Unilateral measures taken by States against other States without prior authorization by the international community continue to undermine global security, stability and people's livelihoods, as well as the credibility of multilateral institutions. Rising inequality, lack of economic opportunity, especially among young people, extremism, nationalism and gender violence, as well as a shrinking democratic space, all contribute to increased violence.

The IPU was founded on the notion that dialogue is central to the peaceful resolution of conflict. The global parliamentary community has consistently subscribed to this view and confirmed its dedication to working towards these goals. Over the years, parliaments and parliamentarians have taken a series of measures conducive to peace and better understanding, including establishing parliamentary friendship groups with other countries, engaging in regular parliamentary dialogue and exchange programmes, promoting and defending the human rights of other parliamentarians, and holding their own governments to account for the implementation of international commitments.

Since they represent people from all walks of life and political perspectives, parliaments and parliamentarians are ideally placed to take a holistic approach to addressing conflict and building peace. Parliaments are responsible for adopting and updating legislation with a view to both protecting and empowering citizens in an inclusive way. The concepts of *human security* and *common security* offer parliaments useful lenses to re-centre national policies around the real needs of the people, emphasizing human wellbeing and social justice.

Within countries, conflict is most often the result of economic inequality and discrimination against entire groups. Making full use of their legislative, budgetary and oversight authority, parliaments must stand up for the most vulnerable, and against discrimination and hatred in all their forms. In particular, parliaments must empower their young and women members and ensure their equal participation and leadership in all areas, including the strengthening of global security, peace and stability. The rationale for women's empowerment, gender equality, and youth participation is not only about equity and rights, but also about strengthening governance and sustainable peace. Parliaments are required to guarantee a solid legal framework against gender-based violence, including sexual violence, which comprises provisions on prevention, protection and support for survivors, and prosecution and punishment of perpetrators. Parliamentary action is also needed to curb corruption and instill more transparency and accountability in the allocation of public resources in ways that benefit everyone fairly.

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At the international level, parliamentary diplomacy can make an important contribution to conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding. Tensions between countries and regional blocs are often the result of actions taken by leaders acting on their own with little involvement by parliaments and the people at large. As representatives of the people, parliamentarians need to play their legitimate role in international relations more robustly, including through helping to prevent and mediate conflict situations around the world. Among other things, parliaments can account for and address past grievances and ongoing turmoil, stressing the importance of local perspectives and strengthening citizen engagement. Parliamentarians, in turn, are not bound by the formal constraints of negotiating mandates, and can play an important role in exchanging political messages, establishing channels of communication where diplomatic ties are limited or severed, and finding innovative solutions. Parliamentarians are also well-placed to convey messages of peaceful coexistence and engage in mechanisms such as interfaith dialogue.

A strong and effective international legal framework, with the United Nations at its core, is essential for maintaining global peace and security. Parliaments are critical in upholding and revitalizing this system, making sure that their governments respect international law, as well as ensuring the implementation of a wide range of international peace treaties, instruments and covenants. The input of parliaments to global deliberations and UN processes is essential to inclusive decision-making that reflects the concerns and best interests of citizens.

The General Debate of the 148th IPU Assembly will provide an opportunity for IPU Members and other participating delegations to assess the role that parliaments can play in conflict prevention and peacebuilding at the national, regional and international levels. Delegations are invited to take a forward-looking approach based on good practices and possible solutions, and to focus on what they themselves can do to better leverage parliamentary diplomacy in the service of peace and understanding.

Delegations are invited to reflect on the following questions:

- What can you and your Parliament do to prevent and address polarization along political, ethnic, racial, age-related, cultural, religious or gender lines in your society?
- What is the added value that your Parliament can bring to inter-governmental efforts to promote peace and international security?
- What specific tools can be utilized to support inter-parliamentary dialogue for peace?
- What good practices has your Parliament developed in the exercise of parliamentary diplomacy?
- What results has your Parliament achieved in terms of holding the government to account in the area of arms proliferation and the need to observe international commitments?