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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

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Madam Vice-President of the IPU and President of this Assembly,
Honourable Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliament,
Distinguished parliamentarians and guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At our Assemblies here in Geneva last year we focused on peace: how parliamentary diplomacy can build bridges for peace and understanding, and how science, technology and innovation can be harnessed for a more peaceful and sustainable future. As the Assembly returns to Geneva today – and despite the welcome progress we have seen in the Middle East over the past week or so – regrettably we have still not yet found a route to lasting peace: conflict is still raging in many parts of the world. It is in these times of crisis that we turn to the architecture, much of it devised here in Geneva, intended to protect us all from the worst atrocities of war – international humanitarian law.

The IPU has a long history of encouraging its Member Parliaments to promote respect for international humanitarian law, and for over 30 years has had a Committee devoted to that very issue. The story of that Committee begins with a resolution adopted at the 90th Inter-Parliamentary Conference, held in Canberra, Australia, in September 1993—my first Assembly as an IPU official, when the IPU membership recommended the establishment of “a committee to follow the issue of respect for international humanitarian law, particularly the ratification status of Conventions and Protocols, as well as the implementation of measures at the national level”. Since then, the Committee has monitored accession to and ratification of these and other various relevant IHL instruments and their implementation; conducted missions to learn more about the situation on the ground in various humanitarian crises; liaised with our key partners on this issue, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR); and guided other areas of the IPU’s work, including through regular reports to the Governing Council.

The IPU has also been at the forefront of political support for the development of key humanitarian disarmament instruments, such as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention and the Cluster Munitions Convention. As you know, even before these instruments were developed, the IPU had called for their creation and then put its whole political weight, through its Member Parliaments, to support ratification and entry into force. So, I dare say that that there is a special link between the IPU and IHL.

Over the years, our work on IHL has grown, as has the engagement of our Members on this issue. This is also thanks to the IPU’s two key partners in this area whom I would like to sincerely acknowledge and thank – the ICRC and, with regard to refugees and displacement, UNHCR. We look forward to continuing this important collaboration. We know that there is more that can be done – and, let me say here, as we begin this General Debate, that we are looking forward to the results of the ICRC’s Global Initiative to Galvanize Political Commitment to International Humanitarian Law and are keen to see how the IPU can support this important endeavour.

During this Assembly, in addition to our General Debate, the IHL Committee will hold a special open session on the theme *Safeguarding humanitarian action in times of armed conflict*. At a time when over 300 million people around the world are in need of humanitarian assistance, mainly due to conflict, this session will provide a valuable opportunity to discuss the role that parliaments can play in safeguarding and facilitating aid and relief operations in theatres of armed conflict around the world. There will also be

a virtual reality stand, organized by the ICRC, where you will be able to have a glimpse of the reality of an armed conflict from the point of view of those most impacted by it. I would like to invite all delegates to take part in this activity if you have the opportunity. I also understand that several side events are being organized at the initiative of geopolitical groups or partners that relate to IHL in one way or another – whether on political engagement and IHL, or mediation – which I encourage you to take part in.

Indeed, IHL is an integral part of most aspects of the IPU's policy goals: our work on peace and security most obviously, but also our activities relating to human rights, sustainable development and gender equality. When it comes to peace and security, respect for IHL has been an important consideration in our approach to disarmament and non-proliferation. The human cost of weapons is placed at the centre of our engagement with parliaments on issues involving the arms trade, nuclear weapons and security, emerging technologies of warfare, and military expenditure. The interplay between gender and armed conflict is also of particular relevance for the IPU. 2024 marked a staggering 25% increase in cases of conflict-related sexual violence in comparison to 2023. The UN reported 4,600 survivors across 21 countries, with women and girls making up 92% of the victims. We are confident that more gender-sensitive parliaments will enable the adoption of more domestic laws and policies that implement IHL in a way that accounts for the humanitarian needs of women and girls, and that combats conflict-related sexual violence effectively.

As the title of this General Debate emphasizes, there are two sides to the role of parliaments when it comes to IHL: upholding humanitarian norms and supporting humanitarian action. Parliaments are instrumental in the ratification of the treaties and conventions that establish the norms we have come to accept as the IHL framework: the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, and subsequent instruments on topics such as anti-personnel mines, cluster munitions and the involvement of children in armed conflict. Parliaments also need to exercise their oversight role in ensuring that their governments adhere to these norms without fail and take action to ensure accountability should violations occur.

But parliamentarians must also advocate and legislate for humanitarian action, providing aid to those most affected by armed conflict: saving lives, alleviating suffering and restoring human dignity. In short, humanitarian action appeals to our common humanity: it provides us with a route to overcome division, violence and mistrust, and to help those caught in the crossfire to survive and continue their lives in safety and dignity. In a world in which the old geopolitical order is becoming ever more fragmented, where countries are turning inwards, and mistrust in multilateral institutions is growing, humanitarian action is particularly under threat. We must redouble our efforts to ensure that aid and assistance reach all those caught up in conflict and other disasters.

This General Debate will offer an opportunity for participants to explore the ways in which parliaments can promote respect for all aspects of IHL, how they can safeguard humanitarian action in the current context of multilateralism in crisis, and how they can work together and with other stakeholders to advance the humanitarian agenda. I think we can all agree that it is our fundamental responsibility to protect our fellow humans, even when conflicts erupt, and to help those caught up in conflict or disaster, especially the most vulnerable. In a year in which the United Nations is marking its 80th anniversary, we have a golden opportunity before us to reform and reinforce the multilateral system and protect these basic values. I wish you fruitful deliberations in this General Debate.

Thank you.