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English only

Opening remarks by Gabriela Cuevas Barron, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

General Debate on *Strengthening international law: Parliamentary roles and mechanisms, and the contribution of regional cooperation.*

Dear Madam Gojkovic, Speaker of the National Assembly of Serbia,
Dear Mr. Brahimi, Founding Member of The Elders,
Dear colleagues, dear friends,

First of all, I would like to sincerely thank the Serbian parliament and the national authorities for their gracious hospitality and warm welcome here in Belgrade, 56 years after the 52nd IPU Conference that took place in this same magical and historical city.

The IPU has always believed in international law.

Before the United Nations, before the League of Nations, there was the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In a context of growing tension between States at the end of the 19th century, visionary parliamentarians came together to seek peaceful solutions to issues of international security, promoting political dialogue to build confidence and mutual understanding among peoples and nations.

These parliamentarians laid the foundation for international mediation and arbitration and they helped convene the international peace conferences in The Hague in 1899 and 1907, which in turn set the basis for international law as we know it today. The Permanent Court of Arbitration was created in 1899, based on principles that still are at the heart of many international judicial institutions today, including the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

In line with this heritage, it is our duty, today, to continue strengthening international law.

As parliamentarians, we are guarantors of peace and harmony. We have the mandate, and the huge responsibility, of promoting friendship instead of hate.

We were elected by the people to build bridges and relieve social and political tensions, not exacerbate them – to find and implement sustainable solutions in the service of our peoples, leaving no one behind.

We were elected to oversee the action of governments, to guarantee that they meet their commitment to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, and not to be silent bystanders when it comes to injustice and atrocity.

It is our responsibility to do our utmost to promote dialogue, to build understanding.

We should not yield to the temptation of taking shortcuts. Because, yes, hate speech and manipulating people's fears is the easy way.

A lot of courage is needed to face hatred with openness, to combat horror with solidarity. A lot of courage is needed to remain quiet when the other is yelling and provoking you.

Dear colleagues,

We have to avoid hostility, because hate, fear, escalation of tensions and violence have proven to be devastating.

At the end of the day, and beyond polemics and partisan positions, the toll of war is always destruction, death, broken families and human suffering.

We can avoid all of this if we use and respect international law. Is this not the very essence of our work as legislators: protecting and promoting the rule of law at all levels?

International law is a creation of human emotional intelligence: A codified roadmap for a peaceful coexistence of peoples. A clear and consensual "user guide" to iron out problems and avoid escalation, while respecting each other and protecting human rights.

International law is today our best ally. It is a legitimate tool to improve people's lives.

As parliamentarians, we can ensure that international law is transposed into domestic legislation. And, we have the means to ensure that that legislation is duly implemented:

- by developing effective and evidence-based policies and programmes,
- by allocating the necessary budgets, and
- by rigorously overseeing their successful implementation.

Where required, we can also undertake legislative and constitutional reforms to ensure that adequate legal frameworks are in place to incorporate international law into domestic legislation.

The promotion and strict respect of international human rights law, international humanitarian law and international criminal law are crucial for a peaceful and harmonious world. The legal instruments are there, and we have the legislative, oversight and budgetary powers to make a difference.

I am convinced that, if a group of people can make a difference, that group of people is made of engaged parliamentarians, and that group of people is seating in this room today.

Dear colleagues, we are called to task.

Today our planet is dying, we are killing it. As I always say, there is no planet B!

We have the means to tackle climate emergency, among other actions, by implementing the existing international commitments starting of course with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and boldly going even further.

Another wonderful internationally established roadmap is the 2030 Agenda. As parliamentarians, we can, and we should make sure that our countries achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The time for words is over now; we have only 11 years left to achieve the SDGs!

It is still a shocking fact that less than one in four parliamentarians is a woman. Similarly, half the world's population is under thirty, but only two per cent of MPs are in that age group. Women and young people are critical to the survival and success of democratic institutions. We cannot continue ignoring these facts. In this field, we can, and must, stand up for those who are voiceless. As parliamentarians, to fill this gap, we should reinforce the existing international legal instruments and mechanisms, and contribute to the creation of new ones.

Regional cooperation is without a doubt an essential component of strengthening the international legal order, contributing to a peaceful settlement of disputes and advancing sustainable peace. The vast majority of regional organizations benefit from parliamentary assemblies and unions. They complement the inter-governmental mechanisms and promote greater cooperation within and among regions. I am pleased to see so many of these regional and sub-regional parliamentary organizations represented here today. I invite these organizations to actively participate in the debates and I look forward to hearing your proposals for joint action and effective cooperation.

Dear colleagues,

This year we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Let's take this opportunity to solemnly recommit ourselves to fully implement its provisions as well as those of its optional protocols.

Also, in 2019, the Geneva Conventions turn 70. Let's celebrate this anniversary by reinforcing the observance of international humanitarian law and facilitating humanitarian action, through national legislation and effective funding.

Last but not least, as you know, this year we are celebrating the 130th anniversary of our organization: the historic champion of international law. For the last 130 years, the IPU has been functioning as a laboratory of ideas for new forms of global governance and a fertile ground for a fairer international legal order. We have the duty to honour this legacy.

Let's take stock of our achievements and learn from our mistakes.

Let's take action and assume our responsibility, for democracy, for everyone!

Thank you.