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Strengthening international law: Parliamentary roles and mechanisms, and the contribution of regional cooperation

Your Excellency Madam President, Honourable Members of Parliament, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am deeply grateful to the leadership of IPU for inviting me to this important event and I thank you for your generous hospitality; it is a great honour to speak to this distinguished audience and a real pleasure to return to beautiful, historic Belgrade - after far too many years.

I am here as a member of The Elders, a group of retired global leaders and personalities brought together at the initiative of President Nelson Mandela in 2007. We try our best to work for justice, human rights, international peace and cooperation.

Of course, I speak only in my own name, not on behalf of The Elders or any other party.

As a former member of the liberation movement of my country and an Algerian and UN diplomat, the name of Belgrade immediately brings back to my mind the first Non-Aligned Summit, held here in September 1961. And this city and that Conference are coupled in my memory with another city and another Conference: the city of Bandung, in Indonesia, which was the venue of the Asian- African Conference of April 1955.

Yes, I am indulging in nostalgia, but it is a fact that these two Conferences were events of great importance in their day and had lasting influence; I believe their message is still relevant, and there may be merit in revisiting the Final Declarations of Bandung 1955 and Belgrade 1961 to take a look again at the Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and the calls for nuclear disarmament, international cooperation and stronger support for the United Nations and its Charter.

Madam President,

Your 141st Assembly of the IPU takes place on the 30th Anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. I remember that time as a time of great optimism and high expectations. There was a strong feeling that the United Nations could, at long last, fulfil the promise of its Charter and all pending problems would be solved. And indeed, some of those goals were achieved: for example, both the troops of Apartheid South Africa and Cuba agreed to withdraw from Angola, allowing neighbouring Namibia to gain its independence; Lebanon's fifteen years long civil war was brought to an end; Nelson Mandela came out of prison and, together with F.W. De Klerk, started dismantling the Apartheid System to build the new non- racial, democratic Republic of South Africa: and Cambodia's territory stopped being the nightmarish killing fields we all remember only too well.

That optimism was infectious and remained inspirational. In New York, the first Secretary General from Africa and the Arab World, Boutros Ghali, issued his Agenda for Peace and Agenda for Development, and organised five Summit Conferences, starting with the Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, followed by Summits on Population in Cairo, Women in Beijing, Social Development in Copenhagen and Habitat in Istanbul.

But who better than the people of Serbia and other parts of former Yugoslavia know that the aftermath of the Cold War was also full of costly confrontations and momentous change?

History was accelerating: a few short years after President Bush's Declaration of the birth of a new World Order, the horrors of Rwanda and Srebrenica, together with long-lasting injustices like those endured by the people of Palestine, made it abundantly clear that World Peace was not yet equally enjoyed by all the peoples on Earth.

The New World Order solemnly proclaimed at the United Nations by President Bush Senior was really the World of the Single Superpower, which many in the United States called the American Century.

Following the unprecedented and brutal terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001, President Bush Junior saw his military intervention in Afghanistan and the invasion and occupation of Iraq as indispensable for the restoration and reinforcement of American primacy in, if not domination of, the world. However, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 turned out to be, on the contrary, a great setback - not to say defeat - of almost everything the United States stood for and the beginning of a lasting challenge to US preeminence in the world.

With the rise of China, Russia, India and other countries in the Global South, we hear very little of the American Century these days. But we do hear, constantly, of the Trade War between the US and China, and the media is full of speculations about fears of conflict between the two countries and a revival of the Cold War.

Fear of a return of the Cold War is perhaps not justified but it is a fact that we live in a world of disturbing global tensions and unpredictability.

There are now two existential threats to life on planet earth – climate change and nuclear weapons. Climate change threats are now at the centre of international conversation, and that is welcome, but international ACTION is still well below what is needed as Greta Thunberg admonished us from the height of her 16 years of age.

The nuclear threat, on the other hand, is not getting equal attention. Although the world is now closer to a nuclear catastrophe than at any time since the height of the Cold War, the seriousness of the threat has not been given enough consideration by decision-makers, opinion makers and the public. Are Parliamentarians doing their full share? Or will they do better in the future?

Perhaps you will agree, ladies and gentlemen, that as representatives of the masses, your place is in the vanguard of a new mobilisation campaign against the nuclear threat, following in that the example of the great philosopher Bertrand Russell in the post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki period.

The world now faces the dangerous prospect of a new nuclear arms race between the United States and Russia, with cascading effects on other nuclear states - both declared and non-declared - as well as countries who may feel encouraged or compelled to pursue their own nuclear ambitions.

Relations between the two main nuclear powers are at a worryingly low ebb, shrouded in mistrust and confusion and there is no constructive dialogue between them on the subject.

The termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty poses a severe threat, primarily to European peace and security, but also to the rest of us; it also greatly reduces the chances of maintaining any sort of arms security control in the world.

As The Elders warned at the time of the US decision to terminate the INF Treaty, this was only one element of the destabilising uncertainty around the future of arms control. If the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) is not renewed in 2021, there will be no nuclear arms agreement in force between Russia and the United States anymore. The situation is further aggravated by reports that the United States may “unsign” the Comprehensive Nuclear Treaty and President Trump’s unilateral withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) and continued actions to destroy the deal all together.

All nuclear powers - the P5 as well as Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea - need to face up to their responsibilities and work together to reduce their nuclear stockpiles. If nothing is done, I do not see how the non- proliferation regime can survive in the long run and perhaps even in the medium term.

There is hardly any need to remind this audience that Parliamentary members have the power of the purse and much influence among the public and they can use both to good effect.

Half a century ago, regional cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean made it possible for the entire region to become a nuclear weapons-free zone.

In South Africa, President Mandela and his predecessor President FW De Klerk did not lose any time at the end of Apartheid to terminate the well-advanced Nuclear weapons programme in South Africa. In fact, Africa also established a Nuclear weapons free zone even if some African countries have not yet ratified the Treaty, due to the fact they also belong to the region of West Asia and North Africa where efforts to create a Nuclear Free Zone have been stalled for decades.

Yet the Middle East urgently needs to establish a Nuclear Free Zone more urgently than any other region in the world. In continuing to prevent that from happening, Israel may ultimately make the very thing it wants to prevent actually happen. One day may come when Israel and its supporters in the West will not be able to prevent other Middle Eastern countries from acquiring nuclear weapons. And then where would the entire region go?

Is it not better for Israel, the region and the world to allow the Palestinian people to have their own State and all countries of the region to establish relations based, NOT on assured mutual destruction, but on mutual confidence, respect and common commitment to a nuclear weapons free zone?

Madam President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the Munich Security Conference earlier this year, The Elders presented to the participants a few proposals aimed at raising public awareness of the issue and suggesting ways for progress towards nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. In the face of such a complex challenge, we are proposing an incremental “minimisation” agenda which acknowledges geopolitical realities whilst insisting on the urgency of action.

Our proposals are summarized under the following four headings - which we call “the 4 Ds”:

- (1) Doctrine: every one of the nine nuclear armed states should make an unequivocal “No First Strike” declaration.
- (2) De-alerting: a staggering 2000 US and Russian weapons remain on a dangerously high state of alert. The highest priority should be given to taking as many as possible of those weapons off this status.
- (3) Deployment: over a quarter of the world’s stockpile of nuclear weapons remain operationally deployed. This is unnecessarily excessive, and poses excessively high risks to global security. An extension of New START is a crucial next step - which makes the current lack of dialogue between Russia and the US all the more worrying.
- (4) Decreased numbers: The Elders believe that the number of nuclear warheads in existence should be reduced from its present estimated level of more than 14,000 to around 2000, with Russia and the US reducing to no more than 500 each. That is enough to destroy the planet several times over.

These are our modest proposals. But there are many other commendable, more ambitious initiatives that many of you know and support, I am sure; they include the NPT and the Nuclear Ban Treaty which have strengthened legal and normative processes towards the overall elimination of nuclear weapons, the Global Zero campaign and the work of former US Senator Sam Nunn and his colleagues at the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

Other important measures to reduce the nuclear threat include increasing safeguards to track the flow of materials inside reactors, strengthening the capacity of the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA), ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and bringing to conclusion the long-proposed Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.

The field is wide and open for action by Parliaments as well as by the IPU. With commitment and mobilisation, it is possible to effectively defend, renew and expand the critical architecture of arms control instruments which have helped avert a nuclear catastrophe for the past 70 years.

Madam President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Whatever we think of Greta Thunberg, her message and the way in which she delivers it, we cannot ignore the fact that kids are rising up to say this planet is theirs and that we have no right to continue to endanger their future.

Maybe they do not fully understand the complexity of the situation and the difficulties facing the decision-makers at all levels. Nevertheless, the loud protest of these kids illustrates the widespread view that the trust between those who govern and those who are governed has broken down.

The twin threats of climate change and nuclear weapons, as well as other challenges of economic inequality, social injustice, discrimination and corruption, can only be effectively confronted if all sections of society believe they have a stake in the politics and governance of their countries.

Parliaments are well suited to contribute to the restoration of that trust, the strengthening of international law, and further development of multilateral, regional cooperation.

In the rest of the time I have the privilege of staying with you, I look forward to some rich, stimulating and productive discussions.

Thank you.