

Speech by Ms. Heli Järvinen, Head of the Finnish delegation at the 141th IPU Assembly in Belgrade on the general debate theme:

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

Ladies and Gentlemen, fellow parliamentarians,

When Finland gained independence approximately 100 years ago, we were a small rural country with more than 70 per cent of the population getting their livelihood from agriculture and forestry. Different social classes in those days were strongly opposed one another. The journey of the nation has included a lot of disagreement, even a civil war, but in comparison there has been much more flexibility and compromise.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the journey has included a decision by the young independent country to implement the rule of law: to respect fundamental values such as human rights, independent courts of law, free press and indivisible human dignity.

After the Second World War the rule of law principle, which treats every human being equally, guarantees independent courts and regulates the basic rights of individuals, was needed more than ever before.

A small country, isolated almost like an island far away from everything, had suffered a great deal in the war. Much of the country lay in ruins and many of those who had survived were left handicapped. On top of everything, the Finnish people speak a unique and peculiar language almost impossible to understand by anyone else. Yet, building on the rule of law principle, the country has become one of the most advanced in the world. Many nations admire Finland's stability, the level and quality of education available to all, low level of corruption, the status and rights guaranteed to mothers, the standard of living and many other aspects.

Still, despite all of this, the rule of law principle is facing exceptional challenges around the world, Finland included. We face complicated and far-reaching problems caused by climate change and the growing number of people seeking refuge. It goes without saying that challenges such as these will not leave any country without consequences.

The most current challenge might be the war of Syria, which - besides the horrific situation of the Kurds - has left behind a vast number of ISIS fighters and their families. Even today as I speak, tens of thousands of wives and children are occupying refugee camps, which are tormented by heat, disease and crime. If we all, including Finland, want to respect the rule of law, we have to play our part in solving their future.

So far different countries have had different solutions: Australia, France and the Netherlands have decided to repatriate children of dead ISIS fighters, especially orphans. At the same time, the UK has been more hesitant, just like we in Finland, to help our citizens. The USA has discreetly repatriated some of the wives and their children during last summer, while Russia has already some years ago evacuated women and children from the area.

As you know, every one of us is innocent in front of the law, until proven otherwise. It is obvious that some of the people currently taking shelter at refugee camps are indeed guilty, but it is even more obvious that all of them are not.

We must keep this in mind when we are making decisions about their future. President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, has said that children haven't decided to leave their homes in order to support any cause, let alone to support or join any war, which consequently raises the following question: how do we justify to ourselves the right to leave those children there instead of bringing them back home?

Despite the many years that have passed since the refugee crisis in Syria began, the international community has been unable to find an answer or the means to help the people who have to suffer from this crisis.

Many have suggested that we should establish an international court dedicated to solving the crimes that have taken place. But we already have one: The International Criminal Court in The Hague, known as the ICC. The problem that remains is that Syria and Iraq, in the areas of which ISIS has committed the crimes, are not members of the ICC. Further, both Syria and Iraq still have a practice of capital punishment in place and in many countries, Finland included, the legislation does not allow death penalty or even extradition of a convicted person to such countries where the person would face a risk of being tortured, treated inhumanely or convicted to a death penalty.

The situation is difficult and there are no easy solutions. Even I, a citizen of a country with the highest respect for the rule of law, have lots of questions but no good answers.

We must remember, however, that human rights and indivisible human dignity are values to be respected even in front of this difficult question as well as other fundamental questions for humanity which we might face in the future.

The rule of law principle is too valuable to be sacrificed when we contemplate how to solve the future of the ISIS wives, children and the fighters themselves. Maybe we, the IPU-parliamentarians together, can put forward ideas for solutions?

Thank you!