



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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138th IPU ASSEMBLY AND RELATED MEETINGS

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OPENING ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE INTER- PARLIAMENTARY UNION (IPU), GABRIELA CUEVAS BARRON, AT THE 138TH IPU ASSEMBLY

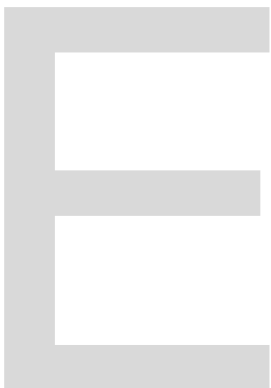
Geneva, March 25th, 2018

Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM),
Ambassador William Lacy-Swing;
High Commissioner for Human Rights, **Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein;**
High Commissioner for Refugees, **Mr. Filippo Grandi;**
IPU Secretary General, **Mr. Martin Chungong;**
Honourable Speakers of Parliament;
Members of parliament, Special Guests, Ladies and gentlemen;

It is both an honour and a high responsibility for me to address this Assembly here today for the first time in my capacity as IPU President. I cannot tell you how delighted I am to be presiding over an Assembly that has chosen to debate the pressing topic of migration as the theme of its General Debate. This is a topic that is very close to my heart as you can imagine. As a Mexican, I have witnessed first-hand family tragedies and dramas unfold as people have fled both from my country and neighboring Central American nations to reach the land of opportunity further north in pursuit of their dreams and a better life if not for themselves, for their children.

Dramas such as that of Brayan Soler, an Honduran child who left his country in 2014, carrying only a couple of hundred *lempiras* (around \$9 USD) he got by selling a rabbit he himself hunted in the rural outskirts of Tegucigalpa. After losing his only cash to some smugglers in Guatemala, Brayan had to swim across the Suchiate river into Mexico at midnight, in order to avoid been spotted both by local gangs and Guatemalan and Mexican immigration authorities. Later on, Brayan hopped on board the infamous cargo train *La Bestia*, a traditional means of transportation for non-authorized migrants traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border.

It is common knowledge among migrants that “you board *La Bestia* alive, you disembark it a mummy”. On board, Brayan had to watch unspeakable things, things that no human being should have to see during his lifetime. Pregnant mothers losing their babies after falling into the tracks, girls of his age – maybe even friends or relatives – been sexually assaulted by groups of human traffickers that haunt the route at all times, forceful recruitment by vicious drug cartels. In one word: ultra-violence. Yet, a broken childhood is still worth the risk not only for Brayan, but for thousands of Mexican and Central American children, whose sole aspiration is to be able to financially assist their parents, left back in the Honduran capital and, to some extent, have the chance of fleeing a generalized situation of violence.



#IPU138

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to acknowledge the presence of the Chiefs of the three UN agencies I singled out in my salutations, from IOM, OHCHR and UNHCR. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to be with us today. We look forward to a fruitful interaction with you later this morning and the possibility learning from your valuable insights. Later today we will also have the privilege of listening to the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros, during an interactive session, and the Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Amb. Ahmet Üzümcü, during a special segment on the dangers of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

2018 is **the** year of migration and refugees if ever there was one. This is the year when the two Global Compacts – one on migration and the other on refugees – will be adopted by the global community. Therefore, it is only natural and appropriate that migration has been and will be a cross-cutting and recurrent theme throughout 2018 for the IPU. The Parliamentary Hearing held last month at UN Headquarters in New York set the tone by identifying the burning issues that need to be addressed in a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration. So this is no coincidence.

As acknowledged by the UN, a human rights-based approach to the governance of international migration is one of the most demanding tests of global cooperation in our time. With an estimated figure of almost 260 million international migrants worldwide – a 49% increase in comparison to 2000 – our world is becoming the world of migrants. Even though most of these people migrate in orderly and legal fashion, it is no secret that there are still millions of people which recur to migration out of necessity or through forcible displacement. As of today, there is an estimated of 50 million (or 20 percent of the international migrant population) people that are under an irregular migratory status.

People such as Brayan and his two siblings, who work as unauthorized migrants in various Mexican cities, are forced to do so mainly by the lack of economic opportunities in their home country. But also, there are many, like 16-year-old Madina, an Afghan asylum seeker currently living in Brussels, forced out of their country by the political and armed turmoil that has ravaged several Middle Eastern and Central Asian regions in the last decades. Along with the millions forced to migrate under perilous conditions, both Brayan and Madina are in constant risk of joining the toll of missing migrants. At this rate, it seems highly probable that we might reach or even surpass the historical peak of 1,447 recorded migrant deaths of 2016. Therefore, the advancement of the international community in the building of an inclusive international framework of cooperation to curb these trends is of the utmost urgency.

The migration strands of the Hearing and this Assembly will tie in with the resolution on “Strengthening inter-parliamentary cooperation on migration and migration and migration governance in view of the adoption of the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration”, to be adopted at the next Assembly in October. The resolution intends to be forward-looking in terms of proposing how parliaments and other stakeholders will implement the Compacts. Taken together, we should have a neat bundle of strands that will inform and shape our future work.

Fellow parliamentarians,

More specifically, our General Debate during this Assembly will identify ways to strengthen the global regime for migrants and refugees through evidence-based policy solutions. As policymakers, we are duty-bound to devise laws and policies based on evidence not on political party affiliation or political persuasion. And to date, the evidence has shown that migration, while a challenge, can be a great opportunity for both receiving and sending countries. Madina’s story, the story of her travel from rural Afghanistan to the cosmopolitan European capital in the heart of Belgium, is a case in point. Now that she has found a safe haven from violence, she only dreams of returning to her homeland in order to build change. “I want all the girls in Afghanistan to know that they can do anything boys can do”, is the intersectional aspiration of this empowering young woman. And this is the case because at the same time Madina is aiming to change the future for thousands of Afghan and Central Asian girls, she is also striving for the further inclusion of migrant communities in Europe.

The 22.5 million Refugees around the world, and most comprehensively the 65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, are not only people in need of assistance, but agents of change both in their home and recipient countries. Hence, I urge you to engage in fruitful discussions and to take away concrete recommendations from the Outcome Document we will adopt at the end and from the workshop we have organized on refugee protection and State asylum systems.

You will no doubt have noticed a big tent pitched outside in the reception area of this Conference Centre. It is a real refugee tent and we brought it in as part of our efforts to make our Assemblies more alive and dynamic and to bring reality closer to where the issues are being debated. I therefore invite you to make your way to the tent and to imagine for just a little while what it must be like for men, women and children to live there for months, sometimes years with little or no privacy, lacking basic amenities such as sanitation, drinking water and sufficient food, and with few activities in sight aside of waiting and hoping for the best.

Cold, vulnerable and broken, some of these people make it to their “promised land”, only to be turned back at the border or exploited by unscrupulous employers in search of sex slaves or cheap labour. Treated with scorn and disdain and generally stigmatized, their hope of a better life soon turns into despair. In 2014, during the height of the Central American migrant crisis, a privately-funded operation returned dozens of children by airplane from the U.S. to San Pedro Sula, Honduras, after several groups protested against the upsurge in unauthorized migrant flows. For a second, let us try to imagine those children, who went through a hell on Earth to reach a better future, only to witness the shattering of their dream.

By doing so, I urge you to acknowledge that we have the power, as members of parliament, to turn the tide. As a starting point, we should stop considering migration as a “problem”. Let us think of it as both a challenge and an opportunity for all parts involved. Let us identify the drivers of migration, look back at historical trends and see how we can “manage” this phenomenon in a more humane and fair manner. Let us try and make the crossings safer, protect the most vulnerable of migrants – women and children – and let us try to make the most of the enormous potential and pool of talent migrants bring to us and put those to the benefit of our societies.

A lot of this depends on changing mentalities so that our constituents regard migrants as fellow human beings and not as foreigners coming to steal their jobs and live off welfare. An opinion sadly shared by the main political leaders of some great powers in the world. It is high time we debunk the myths and dispel all the misconceptions surrounding migrants and refugees. Only then can we formulate sound and balanced national migration policies or adapt the ones we already have. Using populist slogans and policies, almost on the verge of hate speech, is a cheap trick used by some politicians to garner votes. I appeal to your humanity to not give into such tactics. We all have a moral compass within us and I call upon you to follow yours.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish you fruitful deliberations and concrete outcomes that we can take back home with us to our respective countries and leave behind as a tangible legacy to those who come after us. I am confident that both in terms of migrants and refugees, our discussions will nurture a process of translation from the global commitments to their national and local application through legislation and best practices and that this Assembly will trigger new ideas and projects in order to strengthen the international response to large movements of migrants and refugees through a parliamentary perspective.

Make no mistake. We are currently witnessing the highest levels of international displacement and migration movements in contemporary history. Living in a world where 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute as a result of conflict or persecution; where 10 million stateless people are deprived of nationality and access to basic rights; where half of our 22.5 million refugees are under the age of 18, and where the number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow reaching 258 million in 2017, leave us with no further alternative but to take immediate action, especially in relation to cross-cutting issues facing different dimensions of such converging realities.

Let me remind you that besides our central topic of discussion, at this Assembly two of our Standing Committees will also be adopting resolutions: on “Sustaining peace as a vehicle for achieving sustainable development” and “Engaging the private sector in implementing the SDGs, especially on renewable energy”. So, as you can see, we have a very rich and varied agenda and I look forward to hearing your views on all these important matters.

Having said that, I now formally declare the 138th Assembly open.

Thank you very much.