

PRIME MINISTER MELES ZENAWI OPENS 120th IPU ASSEMBLY IN ADDIS ABABA

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The Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Mr. Meles Zenawi, opening the 120th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) at the Millennium Hall in Addis Ababa today, said that even though countries in Africa and the world are doing everything they can to resolve the financial crisis and mitigate its impact, “there is a lot more that each of us could do individually to overcome our current problems. The basic fact remains that this is a global problem which requires a global solution. In the case of Africa, we have had no role in the genesis of the crisis and are mere victims of its global reach”.

The Prime Minister believes that the IPU “can and should play a vital role in resolving the current crisis in a manner that launches the world on a path of sustainable development and a fairer distribution of the fruits of such development. I believe it is only through such efforts that the IPU can play its rightful role in promoting peace, democracy and development in times of crisis”.

For the Speaker of Ethiopia’s House of Peoples’ Representatives, Mr. Teshome Toga, the 120th IPU Assembly is taking place “at a very critical time for all of us - the developed and developing countries. The world is grappling with financial crisis and economic downturn, further complicated by global warming, the HIV/AIDS scourge, terrorism and other formidable challenges. The magnitude and complexity of the challenges require concerted efforts of not only governments, but also the public, the private sector and other actors; failure could lead to catastrophic consequences”.

In the Speaker’s view, both developed and developing countries are bearing the brunt, although they have varying capacities to mitigate and manage these challenges. “Therefore, the need for responsible, transparent, accountable, participatory and timely action is imperative.”

Mr. Degefe Bula, the President of the Ethiopian House of Federation, also referred to the global economic and financial crisis and the fact that legislators have real responsibilities to their constituencies and beyond their national borders. “Parliamentarians have the responsibility to observe and to maintain balanced economic development all over the world. Parliaments play key roles in the efforts being made internationally, regionally and locally to tackle the enormous problems”. He asked parliamentarians of the developed countries not to forget developing countries across the world “when you are discussing budget allocations and financial help to your economies”. He ended by quoting Nelson Mandela: “The time is always right to do right”.

The Chairman of the Commission of the African Union, Mr. Jean Ping, paid tribute to the IPU’s growing role in the global community. The IPU added a parliamentary dimension to international relations, strengthening representative democracy throughout the world. It worked to promote peace and cooperation among all people, goals it shared with the African Union.

The IPU President, Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, said the world is witnessing something more profound than an economic downturn. While acknowledging that “the catalyst for this upheaval is to be found in the banking system, in its uses and abuses”, he stressed that the crisis was triggered “by the failures of a system which many foresaw and none managed to correct”. He added that “We all have some share of responsibility, and that includes ourselves, members of parliament. For while parliaments should not be confused with audit institutions, we are nonetheless the watchdogs and the whistleblowers, we are the auditors of the daily workings of our governments and societies”.

Dr. Gurirab went on to say that the ultimate impact of the crisis is to exacerbate poverty. And it is extreme poverty that ultimately destabilizes society and the working of its institutions. “It is poverty that imperils peace” and in all countries, “there are people, families, who will go to bed tonight racked with anxiety about how to provide one more meal on the morrow”.

Legislators can and must do more, for the economic hurricane that has hit the world is also a herald of opportunity. The IPU will be bringing the parliamentary community to Geneva in May to debate the issues with the representatives of governments, multilateral financing institutions and think tanks. "Our conclusions will be brought to the United Nations when they convene to discuss the crisis in early June".

The IPU President told the more than 1000 delegates gathered in Addis Ababa that "without political pluralism, without toleration of dissent, we will achieve nothing. This implies the right and the ability to hold free and fair elections, unfettered by fraud or violence. It also means respecting the verdict of the ballot box. I am appalled at recent occurrences of military coups against the constitutional order. I have to state, loud and clear, that wherever they occur, the unconstitutional dissolution of parliaments is totally unacceptable to the IPU and must be roundly condemned".

Mr. Abdoulie Janneh, United Nations Executive Secretary, read a message from United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressing that the global economic crisis seems to grow deeper by the day. People everywhere were understandably angry; they could well lose faith in their leaders and their own future. "We could be on the brink of widespread social unrest. That is why, at the G20 Summit three days ago in London, I called for a substantial stimulus plan and for reforms of global rules and institutions. I also spoke out against protectionism. We must do our utmost to protect the poorest and most vulnerable members of the human family, and avoid a catastrophe in human development. I will count on you to help keep us on track toward the Millennium Development Goals".

The Secretary-General also replied to political leaders asking how the world could afford to tackle climate change in the midst of hard economic times. "I say just the opposite: how can we afford not to? If we are going to spend substantial sums for recovery, let us do so in ways that will create jobs and put the world on a path toward sustainable growth. We need a green new deal; we need to seal a new climate deal later this year in Copenhagen; and we need legislators such as you to help with implementation of that hoped-for deal at the national level."

Established in 1889 and with Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, the IPU - the oldest multilateral political organization in the world - currently brings together 154 parliaments and eight associated regional assemblies. The world organization of parliaments also has an Office in New York, which acts as its Permanent Observer to the United Nations.

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