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## Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

### Welcome remarks WHO-IPU African Parliamentary High-Level Conference on Strengthening Health Security Preparedness

Accra, 8 November 2023

Right Honourable Alban Sumana Kingsford Bagbin, Speaker of the Parliament of Ghana

Honourable Members of Parliament from Ghana and across Africa,

Honourable Kwaku Agyeman Manu, Minister of Health of Ghana,

Esteemed colleague, Dr Matchidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this High-Level Conference.

First of all, let me thank our hosts, the Parliament of the Republic of Ghana for its warm hospitality. I would like to extend sincere thanks to you, Mr. Speaker, and to your staff for welcoming us in your beautiful country and for all the work done to support this conference. Your leadership in convening African parliamentarians around health security is inspiring. I am confident that this will be only the first in a series of regional parliamentary efforts to enhance our collective response to current and future epidemics.

I would also like to thank our partners from the World Health Organization for the outstanding collaboration in organizing this Conference across their headquarters, regional and country offices. The IPU and WHO enjoy longstanding cooperation, and it is on issues such as health security preparedness that we can fully appreciate it. In 2018 – when no one could imagine that a global pandemic would hit us with such devastating effects – our organizations already included health security within their priority areas.

Coming back to our mother continent, Africa, even before COVID-19, health emergencies and epidemics have been a persisting challenge. The loss of lives and the suffering they cause are reason enough for concentrating our efforts on prevention and preparedness – but unfortunately their consequences are much more far-reaching. I am sure our colleagues of WHO will agree that when health systems cannot cope with an outbreak, a range of health services are disrupted. When individuals or their family members are sick and cannot contribute to their communities and economies, hard-won socio-economic gains are at risk. Mistrust and misinformation further drive people away from the services they need. Vulnerable and marginalized communities are always hardest hit, in a vicious circle of rising poverty and inequalities.

We need to break this cycle. Better preparedness requires legislation and investment across a number of sectors beyond health; strong and resilient health systems; coordination mechanisms at the national level; regional and global information sharing and cooperation. Although the task seems daunting, there are many steps you can take as parliamentarians, starting from your communities. You can foster dialogue, promote uptake of prevention measures such as hygiene and immunization, and build trust. You can also seek accountability from your governments about preparedness plans and progress on implementation. You can ensure the national budget adequately funds key areas for emergency preparedness. And you can participate in forums like this one, to exchange lessons and practices, better understand existing instruments and how they can be applied in your country context

and connect with key actors to support preparedness efforts at the national and regional level. I have repeatedly said 'you can'. Yes, 'you can'. But above all, 'you must'. Indeed, you have a bounden duty entrusted to you by your constitutions and by your constituents to defend their wellbeing. So, it is not just a question of whether you can. It is also one of duty and obligation to live up to the trust and expectations of your people by pursuing policies that lead to better health outcomes for your people.

The IPU and WHO have striven to forge more fruitful and productive partnerships between the scientific world and the community of decision-makers, chief among whom are parliamentarians. Platforms such as the one we are opening today have become part and parcel of the business model of the two organisations. And I am really glad to have offered one such opportunity during the just concluded 147th IPU Assembly in Luanda, Angola. We had a joint session on the development of the Pandemic Accord and the key components it should bring to the global health architecture, in particular equity and fairness. I am sure we will be hearing more on the outcomes of that gathering as I see here with us Dr Faustine Ndugulile, incoming vice chair of the IPU Advisory Group on Health, who was a prominent participant in that meeting.

As I said earlier, the meeting we are inaugurating today is the first especially dedicated to the African region. I am confident that in the next three days, we will be able to set more solid foundations for better preventing outbreaks and health emergencies. We will learn more on global processes to strengthen the global health architecture; regional strategies; as well as national opportunities. The convergence of these efforts will set a roadmap for the protection of African people and communities.

I therefore encourage you to engage in open and constructive discussions and wish you a fruitful Conference.