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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Annual Session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO

Abu Dhabi, 25 February 2024

Dear Mr. Speaker,
Dear Mr. President of the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference,
Dear Mr. Lange, Representative of the President of the European Parliament,
Dear Madam Director-General of the WTO,
Dear parliamentarians,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you all to this important Conference, which has become an integral part of our valuable collaboration with the European Parliament and the WTO, as we work to promote effective global trade, from which all countries and people can benefit.

Dear Mr. Speaker Ghobash, I wish to extend to you my thanks for the warm hospitality all the delegates are enjoying here in Abu Dhabi, and also for the excellent arrangements you have put in place for the success of this Conference. I would also like to recognize the professionalism and commitment of your team, led by Mr. Al Muhairi, Member of the Federal National Council and Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO.

I wish to take this opportunity to thank H.E. Minister Al Zeyoudi, President of the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference, for his support to the organization of this Parliamentary Conference, in particular for kindly accepting to consider parliamentarians as his guests so as to facilitate their participation in the MC13. I wish to pay tribute to this spirit of inclusiveness, which we strongly support, in the interests of leaving no one behind.

Dear Madam Director-General, the results speak for themselves. The new momentum you have brought to the WTO is already paying off. Your unwavering efforts to bring all parties together and your perseverance to see every initiative through to its concrete results, have made a great difference. Thank you for setting an example for women around the world, encouraging their participation and leadership in the decision-making process, a cause that is close to the heart of the IPU's work.

Last but not least, let me recall our longstanding partnership with the European Parliament, which contributes substantively to our fruitful global parliamentary work on trade-related issues, which we very much value. Thank you, Bernd.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Your participation in this Conference today is a clear recognition of your interest in and support for global trade as the engine of the resilient economy we wish to see.

I wish to place on record our renewed appreciation for the substantive outcomes of MC12 including the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, the Decision on the Agreement on the Trade-Related Aspect of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), the Decision on the Work Programme on small economies, and the Ministerial Declaration on the Emergency Response to Food Security, to name just a few. We share the belief that these outcomes will pave the way for a promising new era in global trade.

In conformity with our commitment to support the work of the WTO and to promote global trade, the IPU has undertaken several actions as a contribution to the implementation of these outcomes.

The Director-General and I sent you a joint letter in July 2023, inviting you as representatives of the people to encourage your governments to ratify the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies. I wish to thank you for the feedback received from several of our Members to this invitation, informing us of the actions you are taking or considering taking for the ratification of this Agreement. We do hope that our joint efforts will pay off in the near future.

In the same vein, the IPU, in collaboration with the WTO, and with the support of the National Congress of Argentina, organized a workshop in Buenos Aires for parliamentarians from Latin America and the Caribbean in 2022. Participants were able to explore the recommendations stemming from MC12 and identify avenues to step up their implementation so as to pave the way for a more decisive MC13, which is expected to conclude the unfinished business of the previous Conference and to give fresh momentum to the global trade process.

Building on the successful Buenos Aires workshop last year, a follow-up regional workshop for the Caribbean parliamentarians is scheduled to take place this year in Guyana, alongside a national capacity-building programme for parliamentarians in Côte d'Ivoire.

We have already planned to organize online briefing for the parliamentary community on the outcome of your current conference as well as those of MC13. It is expected that this briefing will help parliamentarians to devise targeted implementation strategy in anticipation of MC14.

In all of these endeavours, coordination, harmonization and synergy are the name of the game.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to note that the agenda of your Conference includes several important and topical issues, namely an interactive dialogue on the way forward to MC13 with high-level WTO negotiators; and discussions on climate change and trade, and digital trade in the era of resilient economies.

I am confident that you will be providing substantive inputs to those discussions.

You will also be adopting an outcome document, which I trust will provide a roadmap for robust parliamentary action going forward.

I remind you that the PCWTO can only be effective through your steadfast support. As you know, the real action of the PCWTO only starts when the Conference is over and the implementation of its recommendations and those of the WTO Ministerial Conference can begin.

Upon the recommendation of the Steering Committee, a network of parliamentarians engaged with and interested in trade is being set up, with a view to supporting the work of the PCWTO and the WTO both at the level of their parliaments and in their different constituencies. I encourage you to join that network.

I would also like to highlight the following as part of the perspectives you may wish to consider further as inputs to MC13, which will start tomorrow.

Multilateralism

We all know that imposing trade barriers will hurt consumers, especially the poorest. We have witnessed how many economies collapsed following border shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted both people and goods.

This is vivid proof that nobody can live in isolation. We are all engaged in an interlinked dynamic, and we therefore need to provide an appropriate environment in which to discuss and find lasting solutions

through an inclusive approach. Multilateralism remains the best option to find targeted solutions and to build a resilient global trade regime. There is evidence that the multilateral trading system has managed to increasingly integrate countries' economies over time and tempered unilateral approaches to international trade. In that light, we should commit further to promoting a rules-based global order, with multilateralism as its key principle. Let us step up our efforts to that end.

Reform of the WTO

Let me first of all duly acknowledge the Marrakech Agreement, the founding act of the WTO, which I believe is not, and does not intend to be, a one-size-fits-all rule.

The reform of the WTO, like any human endeavour, is part of a natural process of constructive evaluation to make it more dynamic.

The reform should provide the WTO with a coordinated global response strategy to face up to emergencies and protect trade – the robust engine of the economy – from destabilizing shocks such as those we have sadly witnessed in recent years.

As a pillar of our rules-based global trading system, the WTO has binding rule-making and adjudication powers, with essential functions such as *transparency and monitoring, negotiation and dispute settlement*. But over time, most of its functions have become less effective, notably those of the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB).

The reform should strengthen the WTO's rule-making procedures while making sustainable the core functions I have mentioned: ensuring respect of non-discriminatory rules, and keeping the free, fair, open and predictable system applicable to all WTO members, no matter their size.

Global trade should be beneficial to all. The new era, starting with MC12, provides us with an appropriate context in which to scale up global trade.

To sum up, the reform of the WTO should increase our ability and agility to adapt to our evolving and challenging environment, while strengthening the governance of global trade and providing new opportunities to listen to and meet the real needs of the entire population.

I do believe that the WTO is at a crossroads, especially following the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. We will gain much by revitalizing our common organization, if only for the noble cause it defends: ***global trade that puts people back at the centre of its actions.*** Let us make it happen.

Dear parliamentarians,

I wish to invite you to consider appropriate parliamentary actions, including in-depth discussion with your government so as to be kept informed on the progress of the reform initiative at the WTO and, more specifically, to provide input from your own perspective. As you are aware, your approval will be sought for the ratification of the agreement on this reform once it has been reached.

I wish you every success in this Conference and assure you that the IPU stands ready to support the implementation of its outcomes.

I thank you for your attention.