



Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Speech by IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong

United Nations Human Rights Council High-Level Segment

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Madam President,
Madam High Commissioner,
Members of the Human Rights Council,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The Covid-19 pandemic has put humankind to the test. Close to two and a half million people have died so far and many more have fallen ill. The rules of social distancing and confinement have disrupted day-to-day human interaction at its core. This has been particularly true for parliaments, which thrive on bringing people and ideas together.

From the onset of the pandemic, parliaments have therefore had to act quickly to adapt themselves. Many parliaments and their members have done this successfully. They have increasingly resorted to virtual ways of communication and adjusted their procedures. This has been not only an interesting, but also an indispensable development.

Parliamentary vigilance and oversight of executive powers are all the more critical given the huge impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on human rights across the globe. The spread of the virus and the official response have often exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities, putting already vulnerable communities further at risk.

Moreover, many countries have taken sweeping steps – even declared states of emergency – to fight the pandemic and protect their populations. These far-reaching measures have had important consequences for human rights.

Against this backdrop, the IPU has promoted robust parliamentary action to help ensure that national responses to the health crisis respected human rights, and I am glad to say that many parliaments have been able to heed our call. In other instances, however, parliaments have been sidelined, with the pandemic being used as a pretext to limit or exclude parliamentary oversight. The IPU considers that such a partial or full “lockdown” of parliament is unacceptable and that the institution of parliament should always be allowed to play its critical role in our collective response to the pandemic.

Madam President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,

The leadership of the Human Rights Council is needed now more than ever before. The current health crisis has underscored the ease with which a virus can spread and bring the world to a halt. It has also brought out, and sometimes overshadowed, other collective challenges we face. Climate change may be the most defining and daunting challenge of our time, but other phenomena, including rising levels of inequality, violent extremism, forced migration, racism, the disruptive and perverse effects of technology, all compete for – and warrant – our attention.

It is my hope that we will use the pandemic as a wake-up call to also address these challenges in the knowledge that we are all in this together, and that we can only succeed if we put up a united front. You can rest assured that the IPU and our Member Parliaments are keen to play their part in making this happen.

Thank you.