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## COVID-19 pandemic recovery through a human rights lens: What contribution from parliaments?

Virtual global workshop for parliamentarians organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

**Two half-days spread over two days, Tuesday, 29 and Wednesday, 30 June 2021**

Dear Madam High Commissioner for Human Rights,

Dear members of parliament,

Dear colleagues from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,

I wish to extend a warm welcome to all of you. I also wish to thank Ms. Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and her office for their collaboration in organizing this event. I am also very pleased that we are joined by the President of the UN Human Rights Council, whose presence is testimony to the growing importance which the Council attaches to cooperation with parliaments and the IPU.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries took sweeping steps to stop the spread of the virus and protect their populations. These measures have had a significant impact on human rights. State responses were often taken without seriously taking human rights into account. Indeed, the official response to the pandemic and the pandemic itself have at times brought out and aggravated existing inequalities and discrimination affecting already marginalized communities. This workshop will look at available data to understand the human rights dimensions of Covid-19 and the extent to which states have failed and succeeded in incorporating human rights into their policies during these exceptional times.

We know that many parliaments have taken important initiatives, often against the odds as the pandemic forced them to resort to new ways of doing business, to limit the effects of the pandemic, in particular on the most vulnerable parts of society. We will hear about concrete examples of parliamentary action, including at the level of parliamentary human rights committees, to help ensure that state measures complied with international human rights standards. While these parliamentary initiatives are very encouraging, other parliaments did not fare so well and found it difficult to carry out effective oversight. Indeed, during crises, it is often the Executive that is in the lead, having access to more and better information at a time when decisions have to be taken quickly. This workshop should help us analyze these challenges and identify how and when parliaments were able to carry out effective oversight in our hope to assist and inspire others to do the same.

This workshop will, however, not only focus on the way in which parliaments have been able to oversee governments' responses to the pandemic. Early during the crisis, the slogan "build back better" was coined: it underscores the need to be not only "reactive" but only "proactive" in response to this exceptional situation. Indeed, there is growing belief that we should use the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink our overall institutional and policy approach to addressing the underlying obstacles to the full enjoyment of human rights by everyone, in particular marginalized communities. This workshop will therefore also look at countries which have used, with the involvement of their parliaments, the occasion to undertake ambitious human rights reforms.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You will also devote significant time to how parliaments and the UN human rights mechanisms can enhance their cooperation to build our societies back better. Both the UN Human Rights Council and the UN human rights treaty bodies have deployed several initiatives to provide guidance on how human rights can – and should – be a central

pillar in our long-term institutional and policy response to the pandemic. In turn, parliaments can help ensure that what the UN human rights mechanisms say and do is fully connected to national realities. Parliaments can help promote public debate on human rights at this critical time and seek input from all segments of society. Moreover, they can lend democratic legitimacy to the outcome of that debate and galvanize public support for implementation.

Parliaments can also make a direct contribution to the reporting and implementation procedures of the UN human rights mechanisms. Parliaments can take the lead in critically reviewing the draft reports that the Executive has prepared for submission to the UN Human Rights Council and the UN human rights treaty bodies. Parliamentarians can also see for themselves how representatives of the Executive present and defend their report before the Council and the treaty bodies. Such direct exposure helps them to better understand the concerns that the UN human rights mechanisms express and facilitates subsequently an informed debate in parliament. Once the UN human rights mechanisms have adopted their recommendations, it is critical that they are brought back to parliament and seriously discussed, because they often require legislative action and budgetary means. The recommendations are also very useful in that they give parliaments a concrete tool to hold government to account for their human rights performance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Earlier this month, the IPU and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights signed a fully revised Memorandum of Understanding which reflects our growing cooperation and presents an ambitious vision of where we wish to take our partnership in the coming years.

Central to this vision is our shared belief that parliaments and the UN human rights mechanisms stand much to gain from working closely together. This explains why we place so much emphasis on enabling both sides to see the full benefit of such cooperation and to explore further opportunities to enhance synergies between parliaments and UN human rights mechanisms. It also means that the IPU and OHCHR are ever more ready to assist parliaments in their work to help ensure that the recommendations of the international human rights mechanisms are fully implemented at the national level and lead to better lives for everyone.

I wish you a very successful meeting.

Thank you.