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Speech by Mr. Martin Chungong, IPU Secretary General

Conference of Speakers and Heads of African Parliaments (CoSAP)

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Your Excellency the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,
The Right Honourable Presiding Officers of the National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,
Honourable Speakers of Parliament from across Africa,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to have been invited to deliver remarks on this auspicious occasion as you inaugurate this very august body, the Conference of Speakers and Heads of African Parliaments. I would have loved to be with you in person. Alas, other commitments have prevented me from being there. I convey to you all the best wishes of the Inter-Parliamentary Union for success.

I understand your conference will focus on *Enhancing Africa's Post-Covid Economic Recovery Through Parliamentary Leadership*. I salute the choice of this theme as it portrays your determination to stay tuned to the times and interests of your people, and to act accordingly.

This topic is of the utmost relevance. Indeed, we are experiencing very challenging times to say the least. The pandemic has profoundly impacted our societies and not spared the precious, hard-won progress, which had been achieved with regard to the well-being of African people.

Africa is the region that has reported the lowest number of COVID-19 cases and deaths. However, the pandemic has served as an exceptional trigger and exposed major inequalities for thousands of African people who do not have access to health care and social safety nets, who live in insecurity because of conflict or poverty, and who lack education and employment opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased uncertainty for thousands of people, including young people, women and children, who are potential resources of a dynamic society. Disruptions in education and increased poverty are putting thousands of girls at risk of child marriage and teenage pregnancies. Also, there is ample evidence that gender-based violence has spiked. Lockdown measures have severely impacted over 300 million informal workers in Africa and their families. COVID-19 vaccination distribution, which largely left African countries and peoples behind, is the latest testimony of the inequality and solidarity crisis affecting the continent and, indeed, the whole globe.

We know that today a large number of Africans neither enjoy the benefit of the significant resources of their countries nor have access to basic services in accordance with their fundamental rights. I am heartened that this meeting will be an occasion for a reflection on reversing the trend.

It is therefore reassuring that these various issues will be addressed at the highest level, the Conference of Speakers and Heads of African Parliaments. I would like to welcome your initiative to hold this meeting, which as part of the overall dynamic of rebuilding a resilient society, should allow you to explore all the possibilities for solutions with long-lasting impact. In this context, the challenges of the pandemic should be transformed into opportunities in order to successfully support the ongoing change.

The economic shockwaves of the COVID-19 pandemic have been amply documented and represent some of the greatest disruptions the world has experienced in decades. The recovery process is a daunting challenge but it also provides parliamentarians with a unique window of opportunity to help promote an economic transformation that paves the way for more sustainable development.

I would argue that a key element of response as far as the IPU is concerned lies in facilitating a green recovery from the pandemic: such an approach will not only accelerate the clean energy transition but can also create millions of new jobs and boost economic opportunities in sustainable and more resilient sectors. The IPU has been working with a number of parliaments in Africa, including Benin, Seychelles and Zimbabwe, to build parliamentary capacity to promote a green recovery. We stand ready to continue supporting other parliaments in the region in similar fashion.

The disastrous consequences of the pandemic also require us to organize or reorganize work through more transparent and inclusive governance. As some of the main victims of the pandemic, women and young people should receive special attention in the formulation of provisions necessary for the recovery from the pandemic, including more professional opportunities, equal treatment and efforts to combat violence against women in the workplace.

In this view, I wish to draw your attention to a recent report published by the IPU on *Making gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls a reality: Best practices and parliamentary commitments*. This report reviews key parliamentary achievements in terms of gender equality, and fighting sexism and violence against women in the workplace. We will build on those achievements to promote progress in both areas.

Furthermore, social justice should be part of this overall strategy, the implementation of which should produce the expected results as it includes equitable treatment for everyone.

The IPU has joined the widespread mobilization in favour of fair treatment in the fight against COVID-19. To this end, the Director-General of the World Health Organization and I have recently reached out to all Speakers and presiding officers of the world to draw attention to the need for equal access to COVID-19 vaccines, pursuant to a resolution adopted by the IPU in November last year. That resolution stresses the need for every effort to be made to raise awareness regarding the effectiveness of vaccines. It recommends that parliamentarians work with their national governments to exert a global and collective influence on the WTO to eliminate all export restrictions and any other trade barriers on COVID-19 vaccines and the inputs involved in their production. I am sure you will be keen to hearken to that clarion call and to spearhead the campaign in your countries, with possible support from the IPU and WHO.

As I conclude this address, allow me to make a number of suggestions as you embark on your deliberations that would provide the parliamentary perspective on promoting and supporting the economic recovery:

- Adopt long-term increases in health care and social protection funding and put in place robust mechanisms aimed at effectively implementing national poverty reduction and growth strategies as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Ensure legislation and budgeting are aligned with sustainable development and climate targets, and that they support the clean energy transition and green jobs.
- Ensure the ratification and the implementation of the Protocols to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement.

- Contribute to creating confident and attractive environments for investors, key players in the economic recovery effort.
- Focus efforts on the fight against corruption and the promotion of accountability.
- Mobilize parliaments to allocate sufficient resources to ensure that children are in school and not in the workplace.

I wish to assure you that we will be pleased to work with you in the implementation of the proposed measures as well as others that you will determine during your deliberations. You can count on your world organization of parliaments, the IPU, to continue to support your efforts through knowledge and expertise, and by helping to mobilize the solidarity of the global parliamentary community. Last year, in the context of our Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, which many of you attended, we all pledged to exercise parliamentary leadership for more effective multilateralism that delivers peace and sustainable development for the people and the planet. In our troubled world today, marked by war, a global pandemic, economic crisis and the climate emergency, this rallying call for action is more urgent than ever before.

Let us rise to the task, and live up to the trust and expectations that our people have placed in us.

I thank you for your attention.