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Chemin du Pommier 5
Case postale 330
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Geneva – Switzerland
www.ipu.org

Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations

**Statement by Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron
President of the IPU**

21 February 2019

President Espinoza,
Distinguished colleagues,
Friends,

We are here today to talk about the crisis of multilateralism - the operating system of the international community.

I propose that we do so by first taking a close look at the existing system before we determine what else we might need. A reality check is in order.

The rules-based multilateral regime of the post-war era, with the UN at its center, was – and remains – a compromise solution to an age old problem, namely, how can countries be safe in a dangerous world in which power is unevenly distributed?

There is only one planet and one humanity, yet the world is organized by nation states in which governments are elected by, and accountable to, their own people.

Affirming key principles of national sovereignty, self-determination, and non-interference in the affairs of sovereign nations, the UN Charter makes it clear that multilateralism is not a substitute for the relationship between people and their governments.

As Secretary-General Guterres put it, “multilateralism is nothing more than countries coming together, respecting one another, and establishing the forms of cooperation that guarantee peace and prosperity for all in a healthy planet.”

The principle of collective security that is embedded in the Charter recognizes that an attack on any country, big or small as it may be, can endanger the entire international community. From the very beginning, the multilateral system of the UN called on countries to come together in solidarity with one another in the face of adversity.

We may be divided into nation states but we are all interdependent: one country’s welfare depends on that of the world. And no one country can manage by itself. If this was true 73 years ago, it is even more so today as we are contending with the existential threats of climate change as well as global phenomena such as mass migration and a new industrial revolution that only concerted efforts by all countries can help address.

In reality, even the most powerful of nations often fall back on the UN and other multilateral institutions to get what they need for their own people.

There is a paradox that many people have yet to appreciate: national interest is better served by rules that apply to all countries equally.

It's in the national interest to implement the Paris Agreement on climate change so farmers can keep growing their crops and people do not have to move to higher ground because of rising seas.

It's in the national interest to support the Global Compact on Migration so that the responsibility of managing the flow of migrants around the world does not fall on a few countries alone.

It's in the national interest to join the new Nuclear Ban Treaty so that no one country can bully the rest of the world with its destructive weapons.

It's in the national interest to complete the Doha Round of trade to make all countries more self-reliant, avoiding rising levels of debt that destabilize the global economy.

It's in the national interest that the international community adopts stronger tax rules to curb illicit flows and to avoid excessive competition between tax jurisdictions, which contribute to budget cuts and fewer services for the people.

The real problem today, is not so much the architecture of multilateralism per se.

A more insidious problem is growing distrust in all institutions of government, national or international, and in their capacity to delivery on people's needs and hopes. This distrust stems, at least in part, from unprecedented levels of economic insecurity and inequality.

While looking for safety in artificial cocoons, people are lashing out at their governments and the whole world in anger.

Nationalism is on the rise: not the good old-fashioned nationalism that says I love my country but the less benevolent variety that says I deserve the best and the most.

Many things have contributed to this state of affairs. Topping the list, as I see it, is the peculiar kind of globalization that has been practiced over the last forty years, and whose message runs opposite that of multilateralism.

Whereas multilateralism says rules are necessary to get countries to work together cooperatively, this kind of globalization – taking deregulation and liberalization to an extreme – is predicated on the idea that rules are bad because they constrain the economy too much, and on the virtues of unbridled competition. This is particularly evident in the world of finance, which has grown much bigger than the real economy.

And further, since rules are generally bad, the market should be left alone to its own devices. This entails a reduced role for governments and for national laws that would normally seek to mediate between conflicting interests. With governments out of the way, as it were, the inevitable happened: those with money and power got richer and gained more influence, and those without got poorer and were disempowered. The middle class is being gutted, and workers everywhere are making do with fewer rights, more insecure jobs and a more uncertain future.

There is only one way out of this situation: we need more rules, not fewer; we need better rules; and we need to apply the rules consistently, avoiding double standards.

For example, we can't turn a blind eye to violations of international law one day; and then invoke the authority of international law the next day, when our own immediate interests are threatened.

The very legitimacy of the multilateral system is undermined each time countries deviate from the rules. If the rules aren't working anymore, because circumstances have changed, then let's work together on new rules.

For some time now, the UN has embarked on a process of reform aimed at making the organization more democratic and transparent, so that decisions are more likely to be in the best interest of all.

As parliamentarians, we have a huge role to play in this process, and in making multilateralism work for the people. This is why about twenty years ago the IPU started a partnership with the UN that is growing closer every year.

Broadly speaking, this partnership aims at two things: to bring the voices of the people, through their parliamentary representatives, into the decision making processes of the UN; and to hold governments to account for the commitments they make here at the UN.

We want the UN to become more open and more accountable to the people.

Twenty years is not such a long time, and we still have a long way to go. This joint Parliamentary Hearing is just one example of the many things we are doing on this front. Today, we have an opportunity to share our best ideas with UN officials and ambassadors on how to strengthen the multilateral system.

This hearing will help inform our preparations for the 5th World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in 2020. Building on the success of previous conferences, it will seek to send a strong message of support for multilateralism, with a reformed and effective UN at its core, and further enhance the parliamentary dimension to international cooperation.

That multilateralism can be fixed given the tools at our disposal is beyond doubt. That it will be fixed is entirely a matter of political resolve.

As parliamentarians, we have a responsibility to make this happen – for the people.

Thank you.