

27 October 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,  
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Opening Session of the Inter-parliamentary Union Hearing at  
the United Nations**

Mr. President, fellow Parliamentarians:

I am particularly pleased that I have this opportunity, at this early stage of my term as President of the General Assembly, to meet with this distinguished group. I have long been familiar with the activities of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and have been a supporter of its aims and objectives. I am aware too, Mr President, of the role you are playing to ensure that the IPU retains its dynamism and relevance. As a parliamentarian myself of more than 13 years standing, and having been in political life for some 35 years, I have a natural empathy for your work as well as a sober appreciation of the limits of the possibilities open to any one parliamentarian to make change. What the IPU is doing so well, however, is demonstrating how change can be made if individuals successfully act together in pursuit of common goals.

I have also been pleased to learn of the recent deepening of the institutional relationship between the United Nations and the IPU. The United Nations can only benefit from expanding its contacts with a wide variety of international and non-governmental organizations. However, it is important, in this context, to stress that such arrangements should be mutually reinforcing. I therefore look to the United Nations to seek to benefit from the wealth of knowledge and accumulated experience that the IPU brings to the relationship.

You have asked me today to speak on the topic, "Reforming the United Nations as a pre-condition to greater world security". It is a challenging theme, not least because the issue is framed as an assertion rather than in the form of a question. In a narrow sense, of course, it would not be an assertion that all would agree with - process, after all, must be the handmaiden of substance and not the main attraction. But I would prefer to interpret the topic in another sense, and that is to consider whether a significant attitudinal adjustment on the part of Member States is not a pre-requisite in order to permit the United Nations carry out its responsibilities as envisaged in the Charter.

It must be frankly acknowledged that the United Nations is enduring a period of considerable stress. The events leading up to the invasion of Iraq, and the apparent inability of the Organization to play a meaningful role in the crisis currently engulfing the Middle East region, have led to intense questioning about the position and status of the UN in the world. Although the questioning has recently become more intense, doubts about the UN's ability to fulfill its Charter functions have been apparent for many years. These doubts brought about the establishment,

some ten years ago, of two UN mechanisms to look into reforming the work of the two main organs of the Organization - the General Assembly and the Security Council.

After over a decade of deliberation and review some useful, though not far-reaching, progress has been made in respect of General Assembly reform and revitalization; but very little progress, beyond defining the dimensions of the problem, has been made with regard to Security Council reform. Upon becoming President of the General Assembly, I was aware that I was expected to take the lead in moving these processes forward as Chairman of two separate Working Groups. I am treating these responsibilities with the utmost seriousness. I determined upon my election in June that UN reform would constitute one of the priorities of my Presidency. This assessment of the relevance of reform at this moment was confirmed during the General Debate which concluded recently. Speaker after speaker stressed that the UN was an indispensable instrument which, nonetheless, was in need of serious examination with a view to enacting necessary changes. The United Nations, and I as General Assembly President, have thus been given a clear call to action. Member States have re-affirmed their commitment to the Organization while demanding that it adapt to contemporary reality. The first task to be tackled is General Assembly reform.

Not unlike national parliaments, the General Assembly has a gamut of different functions established by the Charter and by the practices of the last 58 years. These functions of the General Assembly are understood by countries in many different ways: an opportunity to make domestic or regional issues known worldwide; a democratic assembly in which the weak can confront the strong wielding the sovereign equality provided by the Charter; an organ responsible for policy-formulation on a wide variety of global issues; and an Assembly meant to take practical decisions to improve the work of the Organization.

These different perceptions make reform a difficult exercise of conciliation. Naturally, Member States will implement resolutions that have taken into account their particular concerns more eagerly and swiftly. But, a national parliament that takes even the most contentious decisions, counts on the Executive branch to implement it. The General Assembly has no such Executive branch. Its decisions do not have the force of law. Implementation depends on the political and moral weight it is perceived to carry.

For my part I sense that this might be the right moment to bring renewed vigour and determination to the reform debate. I shall be going directly from this meeting to preside over the plenary debate on the item "Revitalization of the General Assembly". I shall be announcing later today my choice of "Facilitators", who are a number of Permanent Representatives whom I will ask to assume specific responsibilities to negotiate key aspects of a negotiated package of conclusions. I will be asking all Member States to demonstrate a combination of imagination in proposing solutions and of willingness to be flexible during the process of negotiation.

The reform we envisage at the end of this complex process will not change the essential nature of international relations, but, if done well, it can transform the General Assembly into a more viable instrument to secure consensus and to follow-up the implementation of its decisions. We

seek to foster the building of a "global parliament" more efficient in its decision-making process and more capable of taking effective decisions. Above all, we need a United Nations General Assembly whose decisions are respected and have a decisive influence on the actions of Member States.

The second great reform challenge is the enlargement of the Security Council and further democratization of its way of doing business. The Security Council reform exercise differs from General Assembly reform in a most curious fashion. By an large, Member States see the need for General Assembly reform but are having not agreed on the framework to achieve it. By contrast, most Member States are committed to Security Council reform and agree in broad terms that it should result in an expanded Council with membership increased from the present 15 to a number in the low to mid twenties and that the make-up of the Council should be more representative geographically. But they do not know how to get to this point as there are wide disparities of view as to actual number, on adding new permanent members and on the continuing role of the veto.

I will launch the process of negotiations on Security Council reform in the middle of November. I fully recognize that this is a complex task and that positions, in many instances, are quite entrenched. On the other hand, I discern that the generality of the membership is in favour of Security Council reform and would wish to see it come about sooner rather than later. I will be appointing facilitators to assist me.

I fully intend to test the limits of movement on this matter at this point in time. As with General Assembly reform, I will be appealing to Member States to show flexibility in their negotiating postures and to be willing to pay attention to the importance of taking action which will benefit the international community as a whole.

A streamlined United Nations will not solve the problems of the world, but such an organization will be able to muster more support for credible proposals, and to have its actions carry more political weight.

The result of the process of reform may well be the modification of the UN Charter. In such an event, national parliaments will be called upon to play their part, as an amendment to the Charter needs to be ratified by two-thirds of the membership, or, at present, 128 countries, including the five permanent members of the Security Council.

Being an offspring of parliamentary life myself, I can foresee the obstacles inherent in the process. But I am confident that once agreement on the reforms are reached here in New York, it will be deemed as a legitimate and worthwhile result around the globe and will receive the approval of countries represented by you in this room today.

Thank you for this opportunity to address you and I wish you much success in your deliberations.