



Promoting penal
reform worldwide

Kampala, 2 April 2012

Statement of Penal Reform International

126th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Kampala/ Uganda - Item 3/ General Debate

Mme Chair,
Distinguished delegates,

Penal Reform International, having been granted observer status just recently, is very pleased to participate in this year's Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the plenary.

PRI is an independent international human rights organisation seeking to achieve penal and criminal justice reform worldwide. Its mission is to promote international human rights standards and good governance, in cooperation with governments and other partners.

Given the key role of parliamentarians in these matters, PRI would like to use this opportunity to draw your attention to the need for penal reform in most countries of the world.

Mme Chair,

More than 10 million people are incarcerated globally, pending trial or following conviction. The actual figures of persons detained worldwide exceed this number by far, as statistics reflect imprisonment linked to criminal proceedings only.

A large percentage of the prison population are awaiting trial, while presumed - and often found - to be innocent. An estimated three million people are held in pre-trial detention on any given day. Many will spend months or even years in detention—without being tried or found guilty.

The dynamic implication is such that a multiple of individuals are marked by the experience of imprisonment at some point in their life.

Besides a wide variety of human rights issues that imprisonment touches upon, detention has got a considerable socioeconomic impact – not only on the individuals concerned, but their families. Not only are people living in poverty overrepresented in prisons throughout the world; imprisonment causes and deepens poverty.

Mme Chair,

I think most of us would agree that the goals of the criminal justice system are:

- to increase the safety of society,
- to ensure accountability,

- to provide satisfaction to victims, and
- to prevent re-offending in future.

We have to ask ourselves: Does the growing recourse to imprisonment – which is the trend today - deliver these goals?

In many countries, people are remanded in custody for offences such as parking wheelbarrows in prohibited areas, contributing not only to disproportionate deprivation of liberty, but also to overcrowding of prisons and problematic prison conditions linked thereto.

Does it make our society safer to lock away over 10 million people, resulting in them losing their jobs and their families?

Prison sentences having become somehow the default reaction to what is perceived by society as “wrongdoing”, are prison sentences really the appropriate and most effective reaction to make our society safer?

While we will never live in a world without prisons, PRI believes that it is time to review criminal justice systems and readjust them to fulfil the goals they are supposed to deliver.

PRI believes that accountability does not equal prison sentences.

Studies about restorative justice demonstrate that victims of crime are much more satisfied with receiving compensation and an apology; and that restorative justice reduces the rate of reoffending more than prison sentences.

Mme Chair,
Distinguished delegates,

As parliamentarians, all delegates in this room can play a key role in addressing what experts describe as a “global prison crises”. Members of Parliament can engage, within the parliamentary process, but also in their interaction with their political party and their constituency.

We therefore call on you to support a fair and just criminal justice system, to make society safer and deliver accountability, rather than to focus on revenge and punishment.

PRI takes the opportunity of the IPU Assembly to publish its briefing “What can parliamentarians do to work on penal reform?”

We hope that it will give helpful impulses to the delegates in order to engage in penal reform.

Also, we would like to kindly invite you to a side event about this very matter on Tuesday 6.30 – 7.30pm in the Hotel Grand Imperial.

Let me finish by quoting the famous writer Dostoevsky who said, that “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”

With that, I would like to wish all of you a successful Assembly.

Thank you for your attention.

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