ASIA/INDIA/SOUTH-EAST ASIA REGIONAL SEMINAR FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ON THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS IN THE PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

COLOMBO, SRI LANKA

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OPENING REMARKS

MS MEENAKSHI DHAR
DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMMES,
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION
Honourable Ranil Wickremasinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka
Honourable Speaker of the Sri Lanka Parliament, Karu Jayasuriya, MP
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Secretary-General of Parliament, Mr Dhammika Dasanayaka,
Hon. Resource Persons,
Invited Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me to say a few words on behalf of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association for this “Asia, India, South-East Asia Regional Seminar for Members of Parliament on the Role of Parliamentarians in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights”. Distinguished participants, I am pleased to convey the greetings of the Chairperson of the Executive Committee, Dr the Hon Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, Speaker of the Parliament of Bangladesh, the Members of the CPA Executive Committee, the new CPA Secretary-General, Mr Akbar Khan and the entire CPA family. Unfortunately, due to prior commitments in London Mr Khan is unable to be here in person with us today. Mr Khan was honoured to meet with the Honourable Speaker recently in Malaysia and has asked me to convey his sincere best wishes for a very successful seminar.
The CPA, founded in 1911, is an Association of Commonwealth Parliamentarians who, irrespective of gender, race, religion or culture, are united by a community of interest, respect for the rule of law, individual rights and freedoms, and by pursuit of the positive ideals of parliamentary democracy.

The CPA’s mission is to build an informed parliamentary community. This is achieved through a Strategic Plan and a Business Plan, which ensures CPA activities continue to meet the changing needs of today's Parliaments, Parliamentarians and Parliamentary staff.

The Association's Statement of Purpose states that “The CPA connects, develops, promotes and supports Parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth.” Values which unite the Commonwealth and which are clearly defined in the Commonwealth Charter. As one of those values, Human Rights is a practical tool to achieve good governance and can help to inform and deepen democracy, in order to improve the lives of the people of the Commonwealth.
Turning to the programme itself, I congratulate our partner, the Commonwealth Secretariat, for conceptualising and organising this important and timely Seminar with us. The CPA is also very appreciative of you, Honourable Members: We know your time is precious given the many duties and responsibilities you have as Members of Parliament, therefore we very much value the time you are putting into participating in this programme. This form of cooperation and exchange is important so we can support each other in this Commonwealth family and improve the lives of our citizens and nations and the Commonwealth as a whole.

However: none of this would be possible without the generous hospitality of our host- the Parliament of Sri Lanka. The tasks of a host are many, and let me assure you, Mr Speaker, that we very much appreciate the efforts your Parliament has made to prepare for this event in your beautiful country Sri Lanka. In the same vein, I would also like to thank the Secretary-General and all the staff of for their hard work and dedication which made this programme possible.

This Seminar is the final in a series between the CPA (the ‘parliamentary arm’ of the Commonwealth) and the Commonwealth Secretariat (the ‘governmental arm’ of the Commonwealth) on strengthening
Parliamentary oversight and scrutiny, recognising that effectiveness is dependent upon an active and transparent system within Parliament that allows Members to enquire into government administration and realise accountability. The role of Parliament and Parliamentarians in the promotion and protection of human rights is vital as a marker of good governance and in the evolution of human rights. The ideals of human rights inform and deepen democracy. They are also a means of creating a fairer and more equitable world order.

In 2006, the CPA collaborated with the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative to produce a Human Rights Module for Parliamentarians. The module illustrates practical ways by which law makers can make human rights a realistic, living reality for all, both domestically and internationally. The units of the Module explain relevant concepts and showcase real examples of their application across the Commonwealth. They are also intended to assist parliamentarians in their efforts to fulfil their mandate of promoting, protecting and realising human rights. The Module also provides information on the many ways that human rights can be brought home – through a variety of mechanisms, policies, legislation, processes and structures.
Since that time, we have seen the introduction of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process under which the human rights records of states are reviewed and assessed by the United Nations Human Rights Council. The aim of this process is to improve the human rights situation in all countries and to address human rights violations wherever they occur. It is our belief at the CPA that a Seminar such as this will inform and connect Members of Parliament and provide them with tools to successfully engage with the UPR. Indeed, the CPA has successfully concluded three other similar Seminar like this, beginning with the Caribbean Region in 2013, the Africa Region in 2014 and the Australia/Pacific Regions in 2015.

There are a number of parliamentary processes and tools that parliamentarians can employ to advance human rights issues, including written or oral parliamentary questions to the government, calling for and participating in parliamentary debates, introducing draft bills to highlight key areas of law that need reforming, and tabling amendments to draft government legislation to further a human rights issue.

Parliamentarians can collectively work together on human rights issues in groups, constituted either formally or informally. The formal parliamentary Committees may have a range of powers and functions including
conducting inquiries into specific issues, taking evidence from the government and the public, and producing reports with recommendations. In addition to the formal Committees, many parliaments also have cross party groups that are a forum for discussion and action in relation to particular issues without a political agenda.

As I have mentioned, the last meeting in this series which was arranged by the CPA and the Commonwealth Secretariat was aimed at the Australia/Pacific Regions. It took place in the New Zealand and identified the key steps that parliaments, parliamentarians and the other key stakeholders can take to improve parliamentary processes and tools to implement UPR recommendations and advance human rights issues. Participants of this programme concluded the meeting by issuing a statement, the Pipitea Declaration. In the Pipitea Declaration, Members participating in the meeting reaffirmed the necessity for parliamentarians to engage in the reporting and implementation process of international and regional human rights mechanisms, including the Treaty Bodies and the UPR. On that occasion, they also looked at supporting the establishment of a network to promote inter-parliamentary cooperation aimed at better implementation of the UPR recommendations.
Based on the past success of this programme, we are now applying a similar approach for the Asia/India/South-East Asia Regions. Our hope is that during this meeting over the next three days, we will learn much from each other and this will help us in turn to identify practical examples of good practice and provide direction on new avenues for inquiry.

In closing, I wish to reiterate that the CPA is very grateful for all the Members present and the fact that they are giving up time from their busy schedules to be part of this important discussion.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, with these remarks on behalf of the Executive Committee, the Secretary-General and myself, once again, I welcome all of you to Sri Lanka and to this Seminar and look forward to your fruitful participation and deliberations.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.