

OPENING OF THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE ASSEMBLY OF STATES PARTIES TO THE ROME STATUTE OF THE ICC

The fourth session of the Assembly of States Parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (the Assembly) opened today at the World Forum Centre in The Hague. The new assembly president, H.E. Mr. Bruno Stagno Ugarte, Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to the United Nations, opened the session after the outgoing president, H.R.H. Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein, Permanent Representative of Jordan to the United Nations, had symbolically rung a bell announcing the start.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Stagno Ugarte thanked Prince Zeid for his contribution over the last three years and welcomed his continued support, particularly with the election of the new Bureau. Reminding those present of the Assembly's role as custodian of the International Criminal Court (the Court), the President spoke of the "promise of universality" that the Court had held since its inception as an institution of unique neutrality and impartiality.

Mr. Stagno Ugarte welcomed the ratification of the Rome Statute by Mexico - the one hundredth State Party - as a significant milestone. Since the previous session of the Assembly in 2004 the role of the Court in promoting peace and justice had become ever more important. This statement was made with reference to the Court's issue of warrants of arrest in Uganda. The President also paid tribute to the important contributions made by non-governmental organizations to the work of the Assembly.

Adoption of agenda and elections

The Assembly adopted the agenda for the session and elected a new Bureau and two vice presidents, Ambassador Erwin Kubesch of Austria and Ambassador Hlengiwe B. Mkhize of South Africa. The following States Parties were elected as members of the Bureau: Belize, Bolivia, Croatia, Cyprus, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Estonia, France, Gambia, Kenya, Netherlands, New Zealand, Niger, Peru, Republic of Korea, Romania, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, and South Africa. Ms. Olina Orosan (Romania) was appointed Rapporteur of the Assembly.

Credentials Committee

Pursuant to the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly it was decided that the Credentials Committee should continue to consist of the same representatives as at the previous Assembly, namely Benin, France, Honduras, Ireland, Paraguay, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia and Uganda. As regards the Asian seat, the Assembly decided that Fiji would be replaced by Jordan.

Organization of work

The Assembly adopted the organization of its work and appointed the following working groups: the special working group on the crime of aggression, chaired by

Ambassador Christian Wenaweser (Liechtenstein), will meet in accordance with the rules set out in a resolution adopted by the Assembly in 2002; the working group for the proposed programme budget for 2006, chaired by Ambassador Richard Ryan (Ireland); the draft Code of Professional Conduct for Counsel will be finalized by a working group chaired by Ms. Michelle Dubrocard (France); working groups to consider the establishment of a New York Liaison Office, chaired by Mr. Sivu Maqungo (South Africa), as well as of permanent premises for the Court, to be chaired by Ambassador Gilberto Vergne Saboia (Brazil). The Bureau also recommended the establishment of a working group for the Trust Fund for Victims that will be chaired by Mr. Juan Manuel Gomez Robledo (Mexico). Mr. Rolf Fife (Norway) agreed to continue as focal point for another year on issues related to the Review Conference. Mr. Jurg Lauber (Switzerland) was requested to continue his role as Chair of the Group of Friends of the Court in New York working to coordinate the informal consultations on the omnibus resolution.

Report of the Bureau

The outgoing President of the Assembly, H.R.H. Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein, gave a report on the activities of the Bureau for the triennium 2002-2005. Several proposals for improving the work of the Assembly were examined, such as the issue of permanent premises for the Court, which would need further discussion in relation to the Strategic Plan. A key point of Prince Zeid's speech was the spirit of cooperation that would allow the Assembly delegates to achieve these aims.

The President of the International Criminal Court, Judge Philippe Kirsch, delivered a general report on the Court's activities during the past year. In it he drew particular attention to the extension of the Court's operations in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Kampala, Uganda, and to the field offices which had been opened to aid the Court with investigations, witnesses, victims and outreach. Judge Kirsch stressed that promoting universality was still a priority for the Court and that although international support continued to rise with the addition of new States Parties, further support from States Parties and others for programmes such as the witnesses relocation programme was still necessary. He assured the Assembly that the Court would endeavour to continue to undertake responsibility for effective implementation of its mandate.

After delivering a statement in which he outlined the continuing work of the Court, the Prosecutor, Mr. Luis Moreno-Ocampo, made clear that as investigations progressed, further individuals would be indicted in 2006. "It's a learning process", said Prosecutor Moreno-Ocampo, that needed the help of all States Parties to make the Court work better.

Madame Minister Simone Veil also addressed the Assembly, speaking on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Trust Fund for Victims. Reporting on the activities of the Fund, Madame Veil suggested the possibility of trying to initiate extra funding for the proposed increase in activities and projects. The working group for the Trust Fund for Victims also met in the afternoon to begin informal consultations.

Statements were also delivered by the Director of the ICC Task Force of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Mr. Edmond Wellenstein; Mr. Bruno Cathala, Registrar of the International Criminal Court; and Ambassador Karl Paschke, Chair of

the Committee on Budget and Finance. Ambassador Paschke outlined proposals for a new programme budget and spoke of the Committee's review of the status of contributions from States Parties. He gave an overview of the programme performance of the Court and emphasized the necessity of an annual report. Mr. Cathala presented the draft programme budget for 2006 and explained how the increases over the previous year were a general reflection of the challenges ahead, both in the field and at headquarters, as the Court began a new phase. A working group chaired by Ambassador Ryan (Ireland) held its first meeting following the plenary to begin discussing the proposals.

The Assembly of States Parties is meeting for the second time in The Hague, the Netherlands, where the International Criminal Court is based. The Hague is also the seat of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and of the International Court of Justice.