



EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Delegation for Relations with the Gulf Countries and Yemen

**5th Interparliamentary Meeting EP/Yemen
20-26 May 2006**

***Report by M. Tobias Pflüger, 1st Vice Chair of the Delegation,
for the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Common Security and
Defence Policy and for the Committee on Development***

Brussels, 1 June 2006
PK/ck

I. GENERAL

1. Background

The visit had been envisaged since November 2005, but, because of the complications that arose from the 2006 activities programme of the Delegations not being adopted, the mission was only authorised by the Conference of Presidents in March 2006, which allowed for formal preparations to go forward. Unfortunately, one day before departure, it appeared that Ms Lilli Gruber, Chair, would not be able to take part in the visit; the Delegation was thus led by M. Tobias Pflüger, first vice-chair.

2. The visit

Starting its visit the Delegation was thoroughly briefed by Dr Ralf Dreyer, chargé d'affaires of the European Commission Delegation, which was recently upgraded, from the rank of EC Technical Assistance Office, to a full-fledged Delegation. Members also held the customary briefing with EU Member States Ambassadors, the United Kingdom being the acting presidency due to the lack of an Austrian diplomatic representation in Sana'a. On the following days, the Delegation held high level contacts with the President of the Country, the Speaker of the House, many local Members of Parliament, both from the ruling party and from the opposition, and various Ministers including the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Human Rights Minister.

Generally speaking, the Delegation enjoyed a warm welcome from its Yemeni hosts; as a guest of honour on the May 22 "Unity Day" it also enjoyed traditional Yemeni hospitality, accompanied, in Hodeida, where the celebrations took place, by M. Abdullah Sofan, Secretary General of the Parliament (GPC). The Delegation was also accompanied during most of its activities by the only female MP of the Yemeni Parliament, Dr Oras Sultan Naji (GPC) whose contribution was precious in order for Members to grasp the complexity of Yemen today.

Meetings with the civil society were not left aside, as the Delegation organised a roundtable focusing on the themes of human rights and the role of women in contemporary Yemen with the most important NGOs of the country. The Delegation also gained insights on various projects funded by the EU, such as the Menakha-Al Hajjara road, (EU Food Security Programme) but also on issues and projects related to children (street children, children trafficking) with the help of local and foreign NGOs, such as enfants du monde, and the support of the EU and of the international community (UNICEF).



The Menakha-Al Hajjara Project

II. THE TALKS

i) Briefing by the EC Delegation and Member States Ambassadors

As is customary, the briefing took place at the very beginning of the Delegation's visit; while the main participants were Dr Dreyer, on behalf of the European Commission and Mr. Mike Gifford, UK Ambassador, several other Embassies were represented.

The political landscape in Yemen is still dominated by President Ali Abdullah Saleh, of the General People's Congress (GPC), currently on the 27th year of his rule: such a longevity means that, sometimes, even quite minor decisions are now taken at the top level. The next presidential elections are expected to be held in September. Despite the fact that President Saleh has stated that he will not be a candidate, it is widely expected that he will, albeit reluctantly, accept to be nominated for a new mandate if the GPC requests him to do so. The opposition parties remain politically weak, as there is no clear potential candidate that could challenge President Saleh at the elections.

In international politics terms, Yemen has settled all border disputes with its neighbours, including Saudi Arabia. The demarcation of the new border has been completed and, in some cases, an exchange of territory took place. Yemen is also trying to play a role, as a regional “opinion leader”, in the Somali crisis. It should be mentioned here that recent tourist kidnappings do not have anything in common with the ones seen in Iraq: tribes use kidnappings as a mean of pressure with the government in order to address a local grievance.

Yemen is certainly not a theocracy, and, contrary to some countries of the region, the religious element is not really pervasive. The threat of religious extremism and radicalisation does, however, exist as the population is very young (65% under the age of 24) and armed to the teeth (estimates going up to 3 weapons per capita, underage children included). The government is aware of these dangers and does try to address them, yet it should be reminded that long-term answers are needed: unemployment currently runs at roughly 40%, and half the population lives with less than 1,5 EUR a day.

To these tendencies, one should add that whatever (little) oil revenue there is today will be only partly, and temporarily, compensated by natural gas. At the same time, Yemen's population is expected to double in the next twenty years, to circa 40 million people, making the country, by far, the most populous country of the Arabian Peninsula. This will be specially challenging in food security terms, particularly as natural resources (water included) will become gradually exhausted.

These basic parameters have to be taken into account when planning development aid policies for Yemen, otherwise all efforts will be in vain. International aid, per capita, remains rather low; furthermore, aid is uncoordinated as there are too many individual projects. China recently started playing a bigger role in this respect, granting one billion USD in development assistance – and without linking the aid to any element of conditionality, an example often mentioned by the Yemeni authorities as a model of what international aid should be.

Of course, if one compares the situation with 20 years ago, there have been upward trends (education, life expectancy, for instance) but on other issues – such as corruption – decisive progress remains yet to be seen. Yemen simply does not attract the investments it needs, and Yemenis themselves often avoid investing in their own country due to the lack of a business-friendly environment. Specific measures should therefore be taken in order to allow the development of the private sector, together with further reform of the judiciary (as 80% of the

cases are still reported to be going through informal tribal courts) and strengthening good governance and the rule of law.

ii) Meeting with President Ali Abdullah Saleh

The Meeting took place in picturesque Hodeida, where the Delegation had been officially invited to attend the celebrations in honour of Unity Day. President Saleh expressed the hope that, especially in the domain of development aid, the EU would re-examine its policies toward Yemen. The amounts which have been dedicated until today are more symbolic than substantial; a more thorough approach is needed in order to provide real support to the Yemeni people and to decisively combat poverty.

Shifting from a quantitative to a qualitative appraisal, President Saleh strongly stressed that *"we do not need the EU to impose conditions on us"*, as *"we already have the US doing that"*. Alternative ways of ensuring the existence of checks and balances do exist: for instance, China or Japan do not impose specific conditions, but do follow-up the use which has been made of their aid and thus *"know Yemen is on the right track"*, explained President Saleh emphasising the significance of national sovereignty and adding that *"we are sensitive on such matters"*.

Responding to comments that stressed that it is the role of the EP, as the budgetary authority of the Union, to require specific guarantees on the use of the European taxpayer's funds, President Saleh answered that the "reform agenda", adopted after the Sana'a Declaration of 2004 provides such guarantees and covers many different fields. Some measures have already been adopted—in domains such as the judiciary or customs, but the whole process has to undergo parliamentary scrutiny *"and this takes time"*. Perhaps a European tour, undertaken before the end of his mandate (in September) could help clarify things *"but political will on the EU side has also to be present"*.



President Saleh during the meeting

President Saleh also underlined that Yemen was looking forward to the presence of European observers that would monitor the electoral process; it should be borne in mind, however, that democracy has never been imposed on Yemen, which, on its own, has adopted specific measures in favour of pluralism (*"a leap forward"*) or a stronger participation of women in public life, *"based on our convictions and on the will of the Yemeni people"*. Indeed, even Islamic parties that had, in the past, banned women from being candidates today have reversed such policies as

"they see they represent the future of our society". Asked by Members, President Saleh confirmed that he would not be interested in running for a new mandate in September – to be interrupted by Prime Minister Abdulkader Bajammal, present at the meeting, who assured that President Saleh would be the GPC candidate and that, as a loyal member of the GPC, he would have to abide by this decision.

iii) Exchange of views with Sheikh Abdullah Ibn Hussein al Ahmar, MP (Islah) and Speaker of the Parliament

The Sheikh, continuously re-elected Speaker since 1993, opened the meeting in terms that could barely leave Members indifferent, as he lamented the fact that "*democracy has been ruined in Europe by the US and the philistines*". Referring to the recent Palestinian elections, he reminded that they took place in a free and fair manner, as required by the EU, which should therefore recognise their results, even if there is political disagreement with the winner (i.e. the Hamas). "*We had hoped Europe would have an independent view from the US. Why is that not the case?*"



Sheikh Al Hamar with M. Pflüger, 1st Vice Chair of the Delegation

Replying on behalf of the Delegation, M. Pflüger explained that the standard position of the EP is to condemn the Israeli military occupation of Palestine and to advocate the respect of the 1967, internationally recognised, borders, leading to a mutually acceptable two-state solution. Despite this, Sheikh al Ahmar felt that the EU still follows double standards when it condones Israel's policy of denying the Palestinian access to the most basic goods and medicines.

On the issue of Yemen's democratisation, Sheikh al Ahmar explained that "*we are afraid of the notion of democracy as it is being sold to us by the western world - especially if you are talking of the model that the US exported to Iraq*". The US model, the Sheikh elaborated, was acceptable until recent years, but, since, "*America has changed its skin*". Therefore, what is required from the EU is "*not to export your model of democracy but to monitor how our democratic process is functioning*", including the issue of media access and respect of freedom of speech. The Yemeni Parliament would be happy to issue an official letter of invitation to the EP so that Members return as observers during the electoral process.

The Sheikh also confirmed that he was not interested in competing for the Presidential elections, ("*never have been, never will be*") but stated that Islah would present a candidate to the Joint Meeting Parties (i.e. the common platform of main opposition parties). Summing up, he appealed the European Parliament to support the Palestinian people. Indeed, the interest of the EP in Yemen is certainly gratifying, but compared to what Palestinians are undergoing, "*we are doing fine*".

iv) Roundtable discussion with the opposition parties

The roundtable discussion took place in presence of representatives of Islah (Yemeni Congregation for Reform), the Yemen Socialist Party, Baath and the Nasserites; these forces, and especially the two first, constitute the backbone of the "*Joint Meeting Parties*", a platform which calls for national and political reform, especially in view of the September presidential elections. Such a coalition of opposition parties, already 3 years old, is seen as rather unique in Yemen.

YSP representatives argued that the country needs to maintain a strong relationship with the EU. Support, however, is not needed on merely financial grounds but on areas such as Human Rights, democracy - and "*securing proper elections*". For the YSP, the most worrying factor is that "*since 1997, there are clear backwards trends*", because of the quasi monopoly of power enjoyed by the GPC. The ruling party is accused of (ab)using all the means of the state apparatus to consolidate its position, and of manipulating electoral committees, especially the High Electoral Commission.

As the matter still has not been addressed domestically, YSP hopes that international pressure will be applied; asked by Members, YSP representatives insisted however that "*whatever happens, we will participate at the elections*". Islah MPs attacked the ruling party as "*being the party of the ruler*"; they insisted that, according to the Constitution, the High Electoral Commission should be neutral and independent, which is far from being the case. Democracy in Yemen, they argued, is both "*a right and a necessity*": if it is not strengthened, Yemeni instability will contaminate the wider region.

On behalf of the *Joint Meeting Parties*, M. Mohammed Qahtar underlined corruption as a still endemic problem in Yemen. The two pillars of the state are currently (i) the civil service and (ii) the army; if the regime continues its policies of patronage and nepotism, for instance by "*entrusting top positions to illiterates*", sooner or later the result will be institutional collapse. The platform has submitted specific proposals on reform, and a package which would include guarantees for free & fair elections as well as transparency, according to international criteria.

M. Qahtar stressed that the EU should not follow a policy of double standards in the case of Yemen. If democracy is, in effect, hi-jacked after rigged elections, the result will be "*a war*", as the opposition is "*determined to go forward with the democratic transition*". For him, many initiatives recently taken by the government prove that "*it is clear that the authorities want us to boycott the elections*" - which will not happen.

The issue of whether an EU Observation Mission should be deployed was extensively discussed; while some participants questioned the usefulness of a Mission that would be deployed only on the day of the elections, all agreed that the Observation Mission foreseen -featuring both short term and long term observers, and being deployed all across the country- would be more than welcome, especially as it would also monitor the media in a pre-electoral context.

v) Meeting with Dr Abdul Karim al Eryani, GPC Secretary General, Political advisor to the President

Dr Abdul Karim al Eryani explained that, as far as political cooperation with the EU is concerned, there are no basic issues of disagreement – only particular approaches can, sometimes, be different. Corruption is a problem, yet one should see it in perspective: the EU rightly calls for decentralisation, and yet the risk of corruption is actually higher with local

council members, who have direct control over local use of funds, which MPs lack. However, in the words of President Saleh, decentralisation is "*an experiment which must go forward*", but properly supported, meaning that, without interfering, the Central Government should develop a way to monitor the use of regional budgets. Local elections should not be overshadowed by the Presidential elections, even if they are scheduled to take place simultaneously; while it is only the second time in the history of Yemen local council members will be directly elected, the ruling party, last time, faced a "*very easy situation*" as "*nobody believed us when arguing on the importance of local councils*"

As far as the Presidential election is concerned, the opposition has not fielded any serious candidate yet. No matter how foregone is the result, "*they have to be there*", as democracy needs competition to be sustainable. Asked by Members about whether the opposition would enjoy media access, Dr al Eryani admitted that "*we have to learn*" and that "*there still are shortcomings*". He felt confident, however, that the issue would soon be resolved with the apparition of private TV channels, as is the case, more widely, in the middle-east. He also wished that "*in one way or another, the EU participates in monitoring the elections*".

vi) Meeting with M. Abubakr Abdullah Alqiribi, Minister of Foreign Affairs

M. Alqiribi's main point was that stability in Yemen means stability in the Gulf States: it is therefore in the best interest of the EU as well. However, the Israel / Palestinian conflict has an impact on the whole region, as it is also a point of division for the Arab world. Even with Hamas in power, however, there is the potential to resolve the conflict.

What Yemen expects from the EU is to help it become a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Exactly as happened in the EU with less well-off member states, it is also important for the GCC to see a wealthy Yemen prosper. Sana'a has presented the GCC with reform plans that would be accompanied by a package that would allow the Yemeni economy to take off; the cost would be 45 billion USD over 10 years, out of which only 35% would be provided by the GCC.

Yemen, the Minister stressed, is not interested in receiving cash: what really matters is seeing projects implemented. However, he would still expect the EP, when the Commission presents its budget proposals for development assistance, to enquire "*why so little for Yemen*". Debating the issue of corruption, he did admit it is a problem, yet argued that "*even though work is done... it is hard to eradicate altogether*". For M. Alqiribi, to achieve progress in this field, a sense of "ownership" should be developed, as happened in Mozambique. It is therefore fine for third countries to supervise development aid, but priority areas of intervention should be defined locally by the Yemenis themselves.

vii) Exchange of views with Dr Kahdija Ahmad al-Haysami, Minister of Human Rights

Dr al Haysami, the only female Minister of the Government, explained that her Ministry, created only in 2003, examines around 1000 complaints a year. Its main current priorities include trying to give training to female prisoners so that they can return to society once they have served their sentence; this is necessary as, in some cases, female prisoners have been known to be turned away by their families upon release, to the extent that some prefer returning to prison, perceived as a safe environment. Dealing with Somali refugees is a big challenge; 16000 of them are in Sana'a refugee camps alone and there is a constant flow, as Somalia only lies 3hrs away by sea. This situation could lead to the destabilisation of the country.

The rest of the discussion mainly focused on the situation of juvenile offenders - a well known problem in Yemen where there are cases of them being condemned to death for crimes they committed when underage. All Members underlined that there is a serious discrepancy between words and deeds in such cases, as Yemen's international commitments, but also the Yemeni Penal Code, expressly prohibit such sentences. The minister admitted that, on this point, loopholes do exist and that the weight of "deeply rooted traditions" is hard to overcome: the question of what actually prevails -Yemeni tribal law or Yemeni secular penal law- still remains, unfortunately, an open one. She did, however, explain that her ministry would propose adopting a law that would forbid sentencing juveniles to prisons and create specific rehabilitation centres instead.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The Delegation was pleased to see that one of its standard recommendations, i.e. the upgrading of the Commission's Technical Assistance Office to the status of full-fledged Delegation has been followed. This is another sign of the, long called for by both the EP and the Yemeni Parliament, strengthening of mutual relations.

In this direction, the Delegation welcomes the Sana'a Declaration (January 2004) which states Yemen's commitments on Democracy, Human Rights, gender issues, good governance, etc. Yet, in many domains, the Delegation felt that the commitments had not been entirely met; corruption, as it clearly transpired from most talks, has not yet been determinedly addressed. Likewise, the continuous practice of condemning juveniles to death cannot really be reconciled with neither the spirit neither the letter of the Declaration or Yemen's international obligations.

The Delegation notes that the Yemeni Government shares many of these preoccupations and has adopted the "reform matrix" (December 2005) in order to address them; the European Parliament's Delegation strongly encourages the Yemeni government to follow it with determination and to implement it in practice. This, apart from improving good governance and increasing Yemen's own long-term stability and security, would also provide excellent arguments to the friends of Yemen who, in the European Parliament, call for the strengthening of the EU's development assistance to the country.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

DELEGATION FOR RELATIONS WITH THE GULF STATES, INCLUDING YEMEN

5th EP/Yemen Interparliamentary Meeting
Sana'a

20-26 May 2006

Saturday 20 May

02h30 Arrival of Avril Doyle on MS 691 from Cairo
08h40 Arrival of John Attard-Montalto on EK 961 from Dubai
11h20 Arrival of John Purvis on QR 454 from Doha
21h00 Arrival of Tobias Pflueger, Philippe Kamaris and Morag Donaldson on IY 741
 from Frankfurt/Rome
 transfer to Taj Sheba hotel

Sunday 21 May

00h45 Arrival of Chirin Hlal and Rania Abdullah on TK 12 from Istanbul
08h00 Briefing by Commission and EU Ambassadors – Taj Sheba hotel (Omar
 Khayyam Hall)
10h00 Meeting with Dr Abdul Karim al Eryani, Political Advisor to the President
11h00 meeting with Speaker of Parliament - HE Sheikh Abdullah Ibn Hussein Al-
 Ahmar
12h00 Meeting with Chairman of Shoura Council, Dr Abdul-Aziz Abdul-Ghani and
 Shoura Council Human Rights Committee, Mr Mohamed Al-Tayyeb
14h00 lunch hosted by Mr. Abdallah Sofan, Secretary-General of Yemeni Parliament
15h00 departure for Hodeida (Taj Awsan hotel)

Monday 22 May

 Unity day celebrations - participation in official programme
07h30 Unity day airforce display
10h30 Meeting with President HE Ali Abdullah Saleh and Prime Minister HE
 Abdulkader Ba-Jammal
12h00 Visit to agriculture exhibition
13h00 Reception hosted by President HE Ali Abdullah Salleh
18h30 Unity Day Youth Parade and celebrations

Tuesday 23 May

07h30 Depart hotel

10h00 Visit to EU Project Menakha-Al Hajjara road (EU Food Security Programme)
11h30 Meeting with local councillors in Al Hajjara
15h30 Return to Sana'a

Wednesday 24 May

08h15 Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Abu Bakr al-Qirbi
09h00 Minister of Planning and International Cooperation HE Abdyulkarim al-Arhabi
10h30 Meeting with Opposition party representatives – Islah, Yemeni Socialist Party
Al Haqq Party, Popular Forces Union, Nasserite Union
14h00 Discussion forum with NGOs (women, press, human rights) (Omar Khayyam
Hall) *Hotel Taj Sheba*
16h30 Meeting with Minister of Human Rights, HE Dr Khadijah al-Haisami
19h30 Cocktail at EC Residency, hosted by Dr. Ralf Dreyer, Chargé d'Affaires

Thursday 25 May

08h00 preparatory meeting with UNICEF and EC Delegation Sana'a on issues related
to street children and child trafficking/children returning from Gulf States
09h30 visit to ECHO funded street children project, implemented by Enfants du
Monde/Droits de l'homme and Yemeni NGOs
13h00 lunch hosted by HE Mike Gifford, UK ambassador - acting Presidency
16h00 press conference of European Parliament delegation – Taj Sheba hotel (Omar
Khayyam Hall)

Friday 26 May

01h05 departure of LH 653 to Frankfurt
(*Tobias Pflüger, Avril Doyle, John Purvis, Morag Donaldson*)
08h30 departure of flight IY 866 to Kuwait City (*John Attard Montalto*)
10h05 departure of EK 962 to Dubai
(*Chirin Hlal and Rania Abdullah*)

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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5th Interparliamentary Meeting EP/Yemen

20-26 May 2006

<u>Members</u>	<u>Group</u>	<u>Country</u>
Mr Tobias PFLÜGER, 1st vice-chair	GUE	Germany
Ms Avril DOYLE, 2nd vice-chair	EPP-ED	Ireland
Mr John ATTARD-MONTALTO	PES	Malta
Mr John PURVIS	EPP-ED	United Kingdom

PPE-DE	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats
PSE	Group of the Party of European Socialists
ALDE	Group of the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals of Europe
Verts/ALE	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
GUE/NGL	Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left
IND/DEM	Independence and Democracy Group

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