



Gaza: increased humanitarian aid, end of the blockade and damage assessment needed

In a joint resolution adopted by 488 votes in favour 5 against and 19 abstentions, MEPs call for a damage assessment in Gaza and an in-depth evaluation of the needs of the Gaza population. This evaluation could serve as a basis for reconstruction plans. MEPs call for increased humanitarian aid and for an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip, the immediate and sustainable reopening of the crossing points, and the prevention of smuggling of and illicit trafficking in arms and ammunition.

MEPs recognise the sufferings of the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip and call for increased humanitarian aid to them. Parliament once again calls for an end to the blockade of the Gaza Strip, in compliance with the Agreement on Movement and Access of November 2005, and for the immediate reopening of the crossing points for people and goods.

Damage assessment and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip

The resolution calls for a detailed damage assessment in the Gaza Strip and an in-depth evaluation of the needs of the Gaza population which can serve as a basis for reconstruction plans. The financial, economic and social rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip is an essential element of security in the region. Aid should include payments in cash to pay salaries, pensions and allowances for the most vulnerable people and families.

Parliament calls on the Commission to draw up an evaluation of prospects for reconstruction projects in the Gaza Strip financed by the European Union within the framework of PEGASE and ECHO and their budgetary implications.

MEPs stress that the European Union's financial support to the Palestinians should not be undermined by continuous destruction, which is diminishing support for reconstruction projects in European public opinion.

International donor's conference

In view of the International Conference in support of the Palestinian Economy for the Reconstruction of Gaza to be held in Sharm El Sheikh on 2 March 2009, MEPs believe that any sustainable reconstruction and development policy in the Gaza Strip needs a durable cease-fire. The resumption of "serious" peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians together with a Palestinian national reconciliation process is also needed, says the resolution.

Parliament urges other donors to make pledges at the forthcoming donors' conference

and to commit to the pledges they made at the last donors' conference in Paris in December 2007.

Debate preceding the vote on the resolution - Wednesday 18 February 2009

Conflict resolution and multilateralism crucial, says Javier Solana

In his speech to the House, Mr Solana singled out conflict resolution and a multilateral approach as the keys to a peace settlement in the Middle East. He described the humanitarian situation in Gaza as "heart-breaking" and said an urgent solution was needed to reduce the suffering of the people there. "The parameters for a solution are known", he said. What was needed now was "the political will".

America and Europe can work together

Europe maintained its commitment to a viable Palestinian state, living side-by-side with Israel, and would give firm backing to all who wanted a peaceful solution. Moreover, "the conditions for America and Europe to work together for peace in the Middle East are probably better than ever", said the High Representative, who has recently returned from a visit to Washington.

Post-election Israel, Palestinian reconciliation

Turning to the parties to the conflict, Mr Solana said that following the recent Israeli elections, "we hope the new prime minister and government will be solid interlocutors for peace talks". At the same time, "the Palestinians must get their house in order" and he described intra-Palestinian reconciliation as the "key to peace, stability and development".

A multilateral approach needed

The EU was prepared to assist, as always, and Mr Solana also praised the work of UNRWA. But, he stressed, "it is clear that no single country, no single organisation can tackle the conflicts alone". What was needed was "multilateral solutions", including a role for the Quartet, which he noted the USA administration was committed to.

Border crossings must be opened

Looking to the longer term, the High Representative said the occupied territories would have to be part of a Palestinian state and for this purpose "Gaza must become economically and politically viable". He issued a call for the border crossings to be opened for humanitarian assistance as well as the transit of people and goods.

Other regional actors

Peace in the Middle East requires a united Arab world, emphasised Mr Solana, and he saw the upcoming Arab summit as crucial. He had earlier described the Arab Peace Initiative as crucial to progress. The Iranian elections would be important too, and he stressed the need for "trust" between Iran and the west.

Need for focus on conflict resolution

Concluding, the High Representative said that in the year 2009 we are "at a crossroads", the choice being between continuing with the same policies and getting the same results or working "with synergy and determination" and adjusting policies. Above all, there must be a focus on "conflict resolution" as this was "the only way to end the cycle of death and destruction".

European Commission

"This is a moment of transition for the Middle East" said External relations Commissioner Benita **Ferrero-Waldner**, pointing out that Israel would soon have a new government, and that the new US government was now defining its foreign policy priorities. "Changing dynamics such as these can create opportunities", she said, hoping that a transition would soon be under way in the Israeli occupied territories, too.

The Gaza conflict has left the peace process "particularly fragile" - this is "not where we wanted to be", but "if there is to be peace, then we must all do all we can to get talks back on track", she said.

"We must make it clear to all Israeli leaders that we expect sustained commitment to a solution", she continued, also stressing the need to agree a joint way forward with the US administration, back the diplomatic efforts of neighbouring countries, and "step up engagement with the Arab League".

Political group speakers

"Gaza gets worse every day" said Joseph **DAUL** (FR) for the EPP-ED group. The Israeli embargo means that all aid has to run a military gauntlet, and hospitals cannot cope, despite the fact that "EU support has done much to help".

"We cannot tolerate aid being taken hostage" he continued, condemning the confiscation by Hamas of an aid shipment as "disgraceful".

Economic and social reconstruction are essential to stability, and there can be "no more reconstruction without a lasting ceasefire", said Mr Daul, adding that "Hamas must take the first step, by ceasing to launch missiles". "We must open all diplomatic channels" to restart negotiations, he concluded, stressing the important role to be played by Egypt and the Arab League.

The message must be that there is no violent solution, no military solution, and no solution to be had through terrorist violence. Violence simply breeds more violence", said Martin **SCHULZ** (DE) for the Socialist group.

"Dialogue is vital, but insecurity makes it extremely difficult" he said. The arrival of a new US foreign policy team, focused on dialogue and co-operation, offers "a glimmer of hope", but "look at Jerusalem - Netanyahu is a risk for the peace process", he added.

"Whether Hezbollah can be integrated depends on who's in charge in Tehran", said Mr Schulz, stressing that the outcome of Iran's election would determine whether its government and president are radical, or prepared to talk.

"We favour a unity government for Palestinians, but can Hamas go for this?" he asked, stressing that "somebody had to talk to Hamas" and that those who are prepared to do so deserve support. Further Israeli settlement-building in the occupied territories will "destabilise" the peace process, because in the Middle East, "everything hangs together". Arabs who are prepared to renounce violence and recognise Israel need support - "bombing them won't help", and neither will bombing EU-funded infrastructure projects, he concluded.

Graham **WATSON** (ALDE, UK) said that while it is our "moral obligation" to assist, we need a new, positive approach with or without the US. The EU must take the lead, he said, yet the Council, Commission and Czech Presidency have not said what their response will be to the turn in events. Yes, we can use the Quartet but, he recalled, seven years of extremism took place under its watch and its envoy Tony Blair hasn't even been to Gaza.

Brian **CROWLEY** (UEN, IE) noted that "it is not a negotiation of equals. There is strength on one side, weakness and division on the other side". Secondly, he said, it is not an equal participation of outside influences or outside media coverage (...), and thirdly, most importantly, it is the same innocent people who are continuing to suffer. Aid, assistance and insisting on talks all require "a strategic, brave move from Europe", he concluded.

Jill **EVANS** (Greens/ EFA, UK), who was a member of the delegation that visited Gaza last week, stressed that "we have to put pressure on Israel to end the blockade and open the crossings, and any assessment of the damage caused in Gaza must draw attention to the deliberate targeting to destroy the infrastructure and economy".

Francis **WURTZ** (GUE/NGL, FR) said that he was not proud of Europe and the lack of political courage and

Press release

vision on the Gaza conflict. Israeli leaders were acting inhumanely undermining basic human values and rights. "We have to say enough is enough to Israel", he said. The acts of the Israeli army and government had not strengthened the Israeli peace camp. The Palestinians and Arafat had recognised Israel for over 20 years but with nothing in return. The Arab League has a peace proposal on the table since 2002 which had been widely ignored.

Kathy **SINNOTT** (IND/DEM, IE) stressed that she spoke not on behalf of her group, which did not have a position in this debate, but for herself and her people. She stressed above all the need for humanitarian to get through as the "recent aggression" had left the people of Gaza "desperate". In addition, she criticised the EU for not imposing trade sanctions on Israel, saying this showed it was prepared to do "business as usual". Lastly, she underlined the plight of the "thousands of people, especially children, who have been disabled for life" following the attacks with "particularly vicious weaponry" in January. She also believed evidence should be gathered of targeted attacks with a possible view to bringing war crimes charges.

Jean-Marie **Le PEN** (NA, FR) said Europe could scarcely play a mediating role in this conflict. He argued that "burden-sharing" in this case seemed to consist of "the Americans and Israelis blowing things up and the Europeans financing the reconstruction". He saw Israeli party leaders Avigdor Lieberman and Binyamin Netanyahu as opponents of peace and criticised the continued expansion of Jewish settlements. However, he then argued that there were "hawks on both sides" and wondered if they would ever sit down together.

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