MEPs grill Commissioner Michel on Congo and Lebanon

The Committee on Development debated the effectiveness of the EU's recent election observation mission in Congo and the Union's response to the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon with Development Commissioner Louis Michel on Monday. Some MEPs attacked the Commissioner for appearing partial in the Congolese elections, while others accused the Commission of failing to act with sufficient speed during the Israeli-Lebanese crisis.

Congo: a complex mission

Jürgen Schröder (EPP-ED, DE), who led Parliament's observation mission in the Congo, and Philippe Morillon (ALDE, FR), Chief Observer of the EU's long-term mission, agreed that the Congolese elections were a great success. They also said that EUFOR (the EU's military mission in the country) played a large part in maintaining order during the elections, and in calming the conflict that broke out last week in the capital.

Nevertheless, some MEPs who had taken part in the observation accused the Commissioner of making their mission more difficult by taking sides in the electoral contest itself. Margrete Auken (Greens/EFA, DK) explained that "people in the Congo had the impression that were partial, because we were from the EU," which hampered the work of the observers, who "weren't very popular in Kinshasa anyway." Richard Howitt (PES, UK) asked Commissioner Michel to explain his comments in the media just before the elections, which seemed to back one of the candidates, Joseph Kabila.

Commissioner Michel passionately denied being partial in the electoral process. "I am not a supporter of Mr Kabila, I am not a supporter of Mr Bemba, I support the democratic process and the people of the country," he said. Mr Michel said that his statement in June (he was quoted as describing Mr Kabila as "the hope of Congo") was taken out of context, since he was simply asked by a journalist to respond in one phrase to his name. "I would have said the same of any candidate in the race," the Commissioner said.

Lebanon: repairing the damage

Mr Michel also described his recent trip to Lebanon and Israel, where he surveyed the damage caused by last month's fighting there. He estimated that 32-35 thousand houses had been destroyed in Lebanon, and said that he had requested €30 million of aid from the EU's urgency reserves to help the people there.

MEPs agreed that there was a humanitarian need that required immediate attention, but also called for a broader perspective. John Bowis (EPP-ED, UK) claimed that "it's not our fault that this destruction has taken place, so our taxpayers should not be the
only ones paying for all of it." Anders Wijkman (EPP-ED, SE) also noted that the conflict was over 50 years old. "We cannot keep rebuilding a country that keeps getting destroyed," he said. Miguel Ángel Martínez Martínez (PES, ES) compared the EU to "a fireman who arrives at the scene after the fire has gone out." He said the EU had failed to act in time to prevent the destruction.

Commissioner Michel argued that the EU had been taking a lead in attaining a ceasefire. "We were very involved in the drafting of the UN resolution, and are well represented in the UN force that will be deployed in Lebanon," he said. He also reminded MEPs that the Union does not have a unitary foreign policy, and that this forces the EU to act more slowly than one would sometimes like it to. "Our institutions are not designed for quick decisions and effectiveness," he said.

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