



Post-briefing item

MEPs debate the situation in Gaza and Israel

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Opening a debate on the situation in Gaza and Israel, President Pöttering asked "What can Europeans do? In his view, the answer was that Europe must help push forward the peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians. "The peace process launched at Annapolis must not founder on violence and terror", he stressed.

On behalf of the EP, President Pöttering voiced "dismay and indignation" at the daily TV images from the region, referring both to the "disproportionate military force" deployed against Palestinians and the "murderous attack" on a Jerusalem school. He condemned the violence by Hamas and other Palestinian extremists and called on the Israeli government to listen to those Palestinian voices that were calling for peace.

The European Parliament intends to play a role, using "an even-handed approach". After highlighting the €540 million to support the Annapolis peace support pledged by the EU at the Paris Donors' Conference in December, Mr Pöttering said the EP would put itself forward as "an honest broker". In two weeks' time, a new working group on the Middle East will discuss how EU aid is being used, with French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre, Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and Quartet special representative Tony Blair.

Mr Pöttering also stressed that, while security has a military dimension, mutual responsibility and a willingness to seek reconciliation are crucial. "Hamas must change its ways and work with moderate Palestinians towards peace", he said, and reiterated the EP's support for Palestinian president Abbas and prime minister Fayyad. He concluded by reiterating the need for Europe "to do everything in its power" to give political backing to peace as well as support to the inhabitants of the Middle East.

Political group speakers

For the EPP-ED group, Joseph DAUL (FR) said that, at Annapolis, the Israelis and Palestinians "had a dream". In Paris, "the international community pledged to support this with resources". He believed the international community "should not judge the parties" but to lead them back to reason and the negotiating table.

He also drew three conclusions from a recent visit by the EPP to the Middle East. Firstly, Europe must be more active politically in the region. Secondly, "we must encourage the moderates in Israel and Palestine". Thirdly, we need to make it clear to both sides that they must stop building walls, firing rockets and constantly humiliating each other.

Socialist Group leader Martin SCHULTZ (DE) said "we are all agreed on what is needed". And pointing to the destruction in the region, he said it was unacceptable "that what EU money builds is destroyed unnecessarily".

It was essential, he said, that violence should stop - so why do negotiations always fail? His answer was that, on both sides, "there are those who have an interest in continuing the violence". Above all, "the radicals need this conflict to legitimise their existence, and this has been the case for decades". It is up to Europe to tell them they

cannot achieve their goals this way.

The situation in Gaza is a humanitarian disaster which "no amount of condemnation will solve", stressed Graham WATSON (ALDE, UK). Gaza is "besieged", and the trapping of 1.5 million people there, without power, water or sewage treatment, "has made matters worse than at any point since 1967", he continued, adding that he believed that a further 11,000 Palestinians are being held in Israeli jails.

On strategy, "the EU follows the USA", even though EU investments in Palestinian infrastructure "are being destroyed by the Israeli army using American weapons", he said.

Mr Watson welcomed the informal truce reached at lunchtime on Monday, and wished Egypt every success with its mediation efforts. But he stressed that the cycle of deaths would not be broken by further violence - it would continue so long as Israel seeks to "destabilise every interlocutor, and Hamas continues to fire rockets, knowing that the response will be disproportionate", he said. "As a democracy, Israel has a duty to be more just than its disposable power implies" stressed Mr Watson, urging all parties to look again urgently at the issues and to find a way to live together.

"The reality is that every day, innocent lives are lost, families lose members, and the forces of moderation are driven further apart" said Brian CROWLEY (UEN, IE). The cynicism of Israel's attempt to "starve people into submission" is matched by that of the brutal killing of 8 people in a school, he continued, urging that every species of terrorism - "official, state, or state or state-sponsored" need to be fought with respect for all human life. A two-state solution will work only if both states are viable, he stressed, adding that "when they are recognised, then their leaders must be recognised too".

"What we need is not dialogue, but negotiations, underlined Daniel COHN-BENDIT (Greens/EFA, DE), agreeing with Mr Watson that what the EU needs is its own strategy. "Negotiations" worthy of the name would begin by organizing a ceasefire, and then aid supplies, he said, adding that Israel should be told that unless it immediately halts the building of settlements, then "the EU will no longer support you".

The EU needs to convey the political message that "this cannot go on" - the colonial policy of Israel is a danger to the state of Israel, and Palestinian attacks work against Palestinian interests", he concluded.

Francis WURTZ (GUE/NGL, FR) said: "We had scarcely decided on this Solemn Declaration after 110 Palestinians were killed by bombs in Gaza when further killings took place, this time in Jerusalem, with Israeli victims. We have all condemned these crimes each time. But everyone can see that something else is necessary to be able to hope to break this infernal cycle forever".

What is needed is the courage - over and above the necessary condemnations of all crimes committed, whoever commits them - to name THE main cause of all this evil: the occupation. "And with it, this sinister display of cruelty and humiliation, which are never-ending sources of hatred, despair and desire for vengeance. Nothing can therefore justify this continued occupation.

A distinguished Israeli peace activist, Mrs Nurit Peled, Sakharov Prizewinner, said as much when she lost her child in an attack by a Palestinian. Speaking to the then Prime Minister, Mr Netanyahu, she said: "You killed my daughter!"

Speaking on behalf of the IND/DEM group, Bastiaan BELDER claimed that the number of rocket attacks from the Palestinians increased by 500% since 2001 and that the Israeli activities are justified by its need to safeguard the security and safety of its citizens under international law. He also said that "the claim that Israel is acting with disproportionate violence is a tactic used by Hamas and other Palestinian organisations perpetrating the rocket attacks".

Jim ALLISTER (NI, UK) said that he deplored the recent violence in the Middle East and the ongoing humanitarian tragedy. He said that it was necessary to draw a distinction between the orchestrated and continued attacks from Gaza and Israel's right to defend itself. Israel, he recalled, was an internationally recognised country that accepts a

two-state solution. Israel was subjected to "the most horrendous violence and Israel has the right and the necessity to defend itself, he said". Hamas, had to make the most basic of concessions which was to accept the right of Israel to exist. There was no balance between terrorist attacks and the right of a legitimate country to defend itself.

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