

Statement by the President of the European Parliament on the situation in the Palestinian Territories

16 June 2008 - Strasbourg

Dear colleagues,

A 14-member delegation from Parliament's Working Group on the Middle East visited Israel and Palestine from 30 May to 2 June 2008, led by Véronique De Keyser and Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck. It assessed on the ground the practical implementation of the objectives announced jointly by all parties at the Annapolis Conference six months ago, including the goal of a two-state solution by the end of this year.

Key aspects were: reinforcement of the security forces by the Palestinians themselves, the issue of the extension of settlements, particularly around Jerusalem, economic development and the restriction of free movement in the West Bank, and, finally, the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, which is isolated and subject to international sanctions.

The unanimously adopted delegation report, which was presented last week in the presence of the Council and the Commission and then forwarded to the Conference of Presidents, makes disheartening reading. While it is true that some encouraging progress has been made, this turns out to be localised and limited in its scope. The way that things are developing overall gives no grounds for optimism. In the current state of affairs there is little chance of achieving the ambitious Annapolis objectives.

The delegation is unanimous in the view, which is also shared by the Conference of Presidents, that the Gaza Strip blockade must be lifted, controlled border traffic for goods and people restored, and the violence brought to an end. A new approach must also be adopted in the West Bank: the credibility of the Palestinian Authority must be enhanced and the conditions for lasting economic development sustainably created. Israel's policy of constantly dividing and physically separating must be counteracted. Like the American Administration, as announced yesterday by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, we call for the spread of the settlements to stop, particularly in East Jerusalem.

We take the view that no-one is entitled to withdraw from the commitments agreed in Annapolis! Israelis and Palestinians undertook in good faith and in a spirit of reconciliation to negotiate. This is the path that must once again be seriously pursued. Courage and strength for political renewal are needed. It is up to us Europeans to accompany and support our partners in this process. The European Parliament will assume its responsibilities with determination.

The European Union's relations with Israel and the Palestinian National Authority should be developed in such a way that they further the peace process as a whole. The 'Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean' could also contribute to fostering peace. The European Parliament expects to be appropriately consulted in the context of European efforts to promote peace in the Middle East.

As we meet here, the fishermen of the Gaza Strip are launching their boats. Appalling levels of pollution have built up as a result of the blockade, threatening the fishermen's livelihood, and they are protesting against this. They are demonstrating for their right to fish, their right to life, freedom and peace. Our delegation pledged its support to the fishermen. In all our names, therefore, I should like to declare the European Parliament's solidarity with the fishermen!

Thank you.