



**EURO-MEDITERRANEAN
PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY**



REPORT

EMPA Fact Finding Mission to Gaza Bureau & Enlarged Bureau Delegation

22/24 February 2009

Cairo, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem and Amman

Fact finding Mission of EMPA to GAZA 22-24/02/2009.

Objectives :

This mission was set up in line with the EMPA Bureau decision of 29 January to assess the situation (humanitarian needs and the reconstruction) after the recent military intervention in Gaza and to contribute with high-level parliamentary diplomacy means to the re-launch of the Middle East Peace Process towards the viable implementation of a two-state-solution.

Composition

The delegation led by President Hans-Gert Pöttering included the chairpersons of the EMPA committees (Ms Tokia Saïfi, Political, Mr. Abou El-Enein, Economic, Mr. Alberto Antunes, Cultural and Mr. Georgios Salagoudis, Chair of the ad hoc Committee on Energy & Environment). The geographic diversity of this delegation proved active involvement of the European and the Mediterranean partner EMPA member Parliaments.

Meetings held :

In Cairo, the delegation met the President of the Egyptian People's Assembly, Fathi Ahmed Sorour (February 22), bearing witness to the important regional role of Egypt in the Peace Process.

In Gaza, the delegation visited the Gaza strip under the auspices of UNWRA, the United Nations Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Middle East and met Karen Abu Zayad, UNRWA's Commissioner General (February 23).

In Israel, the delegation met local authorities in Sderot (on February 23) and in Jerusalem met President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livni and the Likud leader, Benjamin Netanyahu ("Prime Minister designate") (on February 24).

In Ramallah, the delegation met Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority as well as with a delegation of PLC Members (February 24)

In Amman, the delegation concluded its mission meeting Abdel-Hadi Majali, Speaker of the Jordanian House of Representatives and Vice-President of EMPA, and a delegation of Jordanian Members of Parliament (24 February).

Joint press conferences were organised in Cairo (with Mr Sorour), Gaza (with Mrs Abu Zayad), Ramallah (with Mr Fayyad) and Amman (with Mr Majali).

MAIN FACTUAL ELEMENTS OBSERVED AND CONCERNS RAISED

1 - Humanitarian situation (UNRWA meeting)

Most health facilities are operational and public health programmes, including immunisation, have fully resumed. However the health system remains affected by the blockade. The flow of vital and crucial medical supplies has been prevented because of borders closures. More than 25 medical facilities (clinics and hospitals full equipped) have been partially or totally destroyed. Most Gaza households continue to

rely on food aid. Basic commodities and vegetables can be found in Gaza's markets but there is a severe shortage in basic goods. The number of disapproved food items has grown. Lentils, pasta, fruit juice and even sweets are not allowed to enter and UNRWA is facing difficulties in its food distribution operations because of a lack of plastic bags (for packing), another item also forbidden to enter Gaza. Textbooks and blank paper are not allowed and 60% of the children are without their full complement of school textbooks. Many educational institutions (schools, universities) suffered substantial damage (10 schools totally destroyed, 171 partially destroyed, 22 university's buildings partially or totally destroyed).

In order to meet basic humanitarian needs UNRWA officials insisted on expanding the list of products allowed entering into Gaza (only 15 categories of items are allowed for the moment). It has also been stressed that the capacity of the current crossing points (Karem Shalom, Karni) should be increased. A minimum average of 500 trucks should cross daily at Karni (the maximum average has been 173 trucks for the last days).

2 - Economic and public service damages (meetings with UNRWA and private sector representatives)

According to UNRWA and private sector representatives, essential infrastructure was destroyed during the Israeli offensive: 15.000 houses damaged and major disruptions caused to water and sanitation networks, roads and bridges and telecommunication system.

Cultivated areas (17% destroyed totally) and factories suffered major destruction damaging employment opportunities and at the same time putting at risk food security. 68 government buildings and 31 offices of NGOs have been destroyed. Thousands of people remain homeless. Micro-enterprises such as shops, workshops, and agricultural smallholdings suffered major damage, when not totally destroyed. Other enterprises suffered economic and financial losses due, in the first instance, to the prolonged siege and then followed by the conflict.

The population in Gaza is estimated at around 1.5 million people (75% registered as refugees) and children constitute about a half of the population. They have been particularly affected by the conflict. They have been witness to immense scenes of violence and suffered injury and loss. International aid agencies such as UNICEF and UNRWA are focussing on the provision of psychological and social support to vulnerable families and children and to help children and young people to recover normal life rapidly (back to school, sport and recreational activities...).

Families whose homes were destroyed during the recent offensive are now living in tents in harsh climatic conditions. The construction of more permanent structures to shelter those who are displaced is severely hampered by the restrictions on building materials entering Gaza. The only steel in Gaza is the rods from destroyed buildings which are being recycled by chipping them out one by one from the rubble and debris.

Unless there is a significant increase in the capacity of crossing points and the re-opening of additional ones and unless reconstruction materials and products are

allowed to enter Gaza, it will be impossible to envisage any recovery and reconstruction.

3- Political situation (Meetings with Israeli and Palestinian politicians)

The visit of the EMPA delegation took place at a critical political moment, both in Israel and in the Palestinian Territories. Benjamin Netanyahu was undertaking consultations with political parties in order to form a coalition to ensure government stability. Palestinians were preparing, under Egypt mediation, the national dialogue discussions, expected to take place in Cairo with about a dozen Palestinian political factions seeking to establish a government of national consensus. Egypt was also preparing for the Sharm-el-Sheikh donors conference (02 March 2009)

The Palestinian reconciliation process is an essential breakthrough to be achieved. Neither the reconstruction process nor the resumption of peace talks could take place without a national consensus government. The EMPA delegation strongly supported the efforts of Egypt.

During the discussions in Ramallah the EMPA delegation was informed by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad that the Palestinian Authority was preparing a *Gaza Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan (GERRP)* to be presented to the Donors Community Conference in Sharm-el-Sheikh. Prime Minister Fayyad outlined in the meeting with the delegation some of the first steps of the plan towards recovering from the Israeli military intervention. He made clear that the immediate emergency needs have to be met within recovery actions and long-term intervention aiming to have a positive and sustainable impact on the 1.5 million people living in Gaza. However this important plan has no chance whatsoever to be achieved unless the internal political situation is improved and the crossings permanently opened.

PLC Members insisted on having the settlements stopped and singled out the E1 project as a major threat undermining the establishment of a viable Palestinian state (isolation of Jerusalem from the West Bank and separation of the West Bank in two parts). New settlements and house demolition practices in the Palestinian Territories were clearly rejected by the EMPA delegation during its meetings. PLC Members wondered what the reactions of the international community would be if the new Israeli government were not to recognise past agreements - in particular, the Road Map and the Annapolis process. PLC members considered that the inter-Palestinian reconciliation process is the priority but space must be made between the conditions of the international Community and the conditions of Israel.

From the talks on the Israeli side, the "new economic strategy" - presented by Prime Minister designate Benjamin Netanyahu to "build up Palestinian society from the bottom up" by strengthening the economic (and security) situation cannot be supported by EMPA as long as it is not part of a political comprehensive solution that leads to the implementation of a the "two-state-solution". It was made clear by the EMPA delegation during all the meetings that a real political vision is needed.

In all his meetings in Jerusalem, President Pöttering insisted on efforts needed to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza ("positive" list of goods to enter, increase in capacity of the crossings, meeting and consulting with UNRWA officials and to lift

Israeli opposition as to a UN-investigation mission to Gaza) and in the West Bank (settlements, separation-barrier and check-points). The President underlined that political steps "must be guided by the principle that all Israeli and Palestinians are equal in dignity". Furthermore he reasserted Europe's and the EU's tax payers anger and frustration about funding infrastructure that is later on destroyed.

Concerning the upgrading of the EU-Israel Association agreement, an issue raised by Foreign Minister Livni, the delegation explained that as long as "strong efforts towards Peace" are not at stake and do not materialise on the ground it will be difficult to convince a majority of parliamentarians.

Israel government leaders¹ stressed the increase of anti-Semitism in Europe, the continuing firing of rockets by Hamas and above all the Iran nuclear programme. Mr. Netanyahu, President Peres and FM Livni insisted that Iran is already developing nuclear capacities "and has its bases now North and South of Israel", (B.N.). Whilst supporting Israel concerns about the rise of anti-semitism and an increase in the number of Hamas-rockets, the EMPA delegation and President Pöttering insisted on the necessity of a political solution to the conflict with Iran.

These discussions clearly show that no comprehensive peace process will be possible without confidence-building measures and widely observed tangible progress on the ground. Parliamentary diplomacy can indeed play a constructive role to reduce the distrust and to enhance the political dialogue.

II - CONCLUSIONS

Humanitarian situation:

At the time the delegation took place, the humanitarian assistance had resumed but many obstacles still remain. Humanitarian personal and diplomats face difficulties to enter and to exit Gaza. Aid is not systematically delivered regardless of political and or religious affiliation of beneficiaries. Therefore all parties (Israel and Gaza local authorities) must be reminded that impartiality and neutrality must prevail. The list of 15 allowed products to enter into Gaza is not enough considering the importance of urgent recovery needs. NGOs and international agencies have requested that the list of approved items be replaced by a restricted list of forbidden products. In addition, damage compensation procedures to people are impeded due to the cash shortage. Solutions must urgently be found to resume cash circulation otherwise the economy of Gaza will never be able to recover and will continue to be fully dependent on external humanitarian aid.

In all meetings with Israeli interlocutors, the EMPA delegation conveyed a clear message about the critical humanitarian situation observed the day before in Gaza and recalled the requests put forward by UNRWA in order to have substantial and uninterrupted aid assistance entering into Gaza.

¹ The newly elected Knesset was not yet in office therefore no meetings were held with Israeli Members of Parliament.

Support to UN action and reconstruction process:

All urgent practical responses have to be accompanied by measures enabling the restoration of the dignity of the people and their faith in international community principles. The UN Secretary General's decision to investigate the destruction of UNRWA properties by Israeli shelling was fully supported by EMPA delegation. It is the duty of parliaments to insist on strict compliance with international law and international humanitarian law. Establishing truth and justice is a right that any victim deserves. It is a decisive part to any reconstruction process and an essential contribution to the peace-building progress.

The permanent opening of the crossings in line with the Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA) reached with Israel in 2005 is the other prerequisite for reconstruction to take place. An international presence at the different crossing points is therefore urgently needed: first in view of the persistent difficulties experienced by humanitarian aid in reaching Gaza; second in order to secure the borders. The international community should therefore support this aim by providing all necessary measures to secure the borders and alleviate the Israeli security concerns (arms smuggling - firing of rockets). Although the European Union civilian peace-keeping mission (EU-BAM) is ready to resume its borders assistance and monitoring activities and even to extend it to others crossing points, sophisticated technical equipment is needed in order to scan trucks and goods at crossings.

Towards a political solution:

The world cannot but take an interest in events in the Middle East, since this region is of key importance for international security and stability. No military solution will bring peace along.

Therefore the Palestinian national dialogue brokered under Egyptian auspices must come up with a national consensus government whose members would be accepted by all Palestinian factions and whose political line would match the existing PLO agreements. The international community should in turn cooperate with such a government in order for the Gaza Early Recovery and Reconstruction Plan (GERRP) to be fully and efficiently implemented.

At the Sharm-el-Sheikh donors conference (02 March 2009)² the international community was widely represented, thereby demonstrating its unflagging interest not only for the reconstruction of Gaza but also in achieving a political solution to this conflict.

EMPA encourages the Parliaments of donor countries to put pressure on their respective governments to fulfil the pledges and to channel assistance through the Single Treasury Account and through existing mechanisms such as PEGASE and the World Bank Trust fund, both offering sufficient guarantees of transparency and accountability.

² International Conference in support the Palestinian Economy for Reconstruction in Gaza

Furthermore urgent measures should be taken in order to allow small and medium enterprises to resume their activities as soon as possible as a first step in reducing Gaza's' dependency on aid by job creation and the restoration of economic activities. An urgent measure would be to put in place programmes and mechanisms to quickly compensate these businesses for their losses (access to loans, micro-credit).

On the longer term, the international community must continue to seize every opportunity to encourage both parties to conclude a permanent agreement based on the terms of reference and principles of the Madrid conference, the relevant United Nations resolutions, the Roadmap and the agreements previously concluded by the two parties. A parliamentary assembly such as the EMPA is particularly adequate to make an original contribution to this process.

Alongside its political and diplomatic commitment the international community must continue its assistance on the ground and should envisage the deployment, in due course, of a multinational peace-keeping force. Whatever permanent status settlement is reached by the two parties the implementation on the ground will need to be supported and monitored by a neutral third party.



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FINAL PROGRAMME

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22/24 February 2009

Cairo, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem and Amman

22 February - Cairo

- P.M. Individual arrival of participants in Cairo
- 19:45 - 20:30 Joint press conference with Dr. Fathi Ahmed Sorour, Grand Hyatt Hotel
- 20:30 - 22:00 Dinner hosted by Dr. Fathi Ahmed Sorour, President of Egyptian People's Assembly

Grand Hyatt Hotel

Corniche El Nile, Garden City, Roda Island, Cairo (tel.: +20 2 2365 1234)

23 February - Gaza

- 05.00 (staff) Departure for Gaza - transfer to airport, private flight to El Arish, road transfer to Rafah
- 07.30 (members)
- 10:00 Meet UNRWA at Rafah crossing
Dustin Okazaki, Special Assistant to Director of UNRWA Operations, Gaza
- 10:30 - 10:45 Visit UNRWA food distribution centre (Rafah)
- 11:30 - 12:00 Visit Al Quds Palestinian Red Crescent Society Hospital / rehabilitation centre
Briefing by Khalid Joudeh
Visit Jordanian field hospital
- 12:15 - 13:00 Meeting with Ms Karen Abu Zayad, UNRWA Commissioner General; UNRWA HQ
- 13:25 - 13:45 Visit industrial area
Briefings by Dr Yasser El Wadia and Haitham Abu Shaban
- 13:45 - 14:15 Visit Izbet Abd Rabo village
Briefing by Imad Okal, UNRWA Area Operations Officer
- 14:30 - 15:00 Joint press conference, UNRWA school, Beit Hanoun / Beit Lania, with UNRWA Commissioner General
- 16:00 Cross Erez and transfer to Sderot
- 18:00 Visit Sderot and Sapir College; meetings with local authorities

19:30 Transfer to Bethlehem - Check-in Intercontinental Hotel

Intercontinental Hotel Jacir Palace
Jerusalem-Hebron Road, Bethlehem (tel.: +972 2 2766777)

24 February - Jerusalem / Ramallah / Amman

07:30 Departure from hotel to Jerusalem via Rachel crossing, Bethlehem

08:00 Meeting with Mr Benjamin Netanyahu, Chairman of Likud, King David Hotel

09:30 Meeting with Mr Shimon Peres, President of Israel

10:30 Meeting with Prime Minister Mr Ehud Olmert

11:45 Meeting with Vice Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs Ms Tzipi Livni

12:15 Transfer to Ramallah via Bet El crossing

13:00 Meeting with Mr Salam Fayyad, Prime Minister
Joint press conference

14:00 Meeting with EMPA delegation PLC members

15:30 Transfer to Allenby Bridge

16:30 Cross Allenby Bridge, transfer to Amman

19:00 Meeting with Mr Abdel-Hadi Majali, Speaker of the Jordanian House of Representatives and EMPA Vice-President, Four Seasons Hotel, Amman

19:30 Joint press conference followed by interviews

20:30 - 22:00 Dinner hosted by Mr Abdel-Hadi Majali, Speaker of the Jordanian House of Representatives and EMPA Vice-President

Four Seasons Hotel
5th Circle, Al Kindi St, Jabal Amman, Amman (tel.: +962 (6) 550 5555)

25 February 2009 - Amman

a.m. Individual departures from Amman airport