

**Statement by the President of the European Parliament,
Hans-Gert Pöttering,
on the situation in the Middle East**

Strasbourg, 12 January 2009

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The Conference of Presidents has asked me to make a statement on the events in the Middle East. The debate is to be held on Wednesday afternoon.

As we gather here for our first plenary sitting at the beginning of a New Year, people are once again dying in the Middle East.

When I see the TV images, I personally – and I am sure this is true of most of us – have a painful sense of *déjà vu*.

On behalf of the European Parliament, I would like to express my great regret at the escalation of the Gaza conflict between Israel and Hamas.

I say it loudly and clearly: it is unacceptable that the population should continue to suffer in this way, that the violence goes on and that United Nations personnel are now coming under fire. How much further does the violence have to escalate before reason and good sense prevail?

The violence from both sides must come to an immediate halt. That Hamas should be firing rockets at Israeli towns is totally unacceptable and to be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Neither must we forget that it was Hamas who broke the ceasefire. But at the same time, the appropriateness of the means must also be borne in mind.

Everybody in the Middle East is equal in their human dignity. The inalienable right of a state to defend itself does not justify acts of violence that impact first and foremost on the civilian population.

Help must be brought to the people of the Gaza Strip as a matter of urgency. The human worth of a Palestinian is as great as that of an Israeli. We must not allow any further deterioration in the humanitarian situation.

As bearers of political responsibility we must be prepared, above and beyond the immediate situation, to help find a lasting way out of the spiral of violence.

Reducing security to a purely military matter is doomed to failure. There can therefore be no exclusively military solution to the Middle East problem. A political solution must finally be found. This means, above all, learning from what has been tried and has failed in the past. That is why we must now take measures that are not only workable but, above all, sustainable.

In recent days I have been in telephonic contact with the President of Israel, Simon Peres, the Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, Salam Fayad, the Speaker of the Knesset, Dalia Itzik, and, of course, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, who has spent a great deal of time in the region.

I have also been in contact with the Vice-Presidents of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly: the Speaker of the Jordanian Parliament, Abdel Hadi Al-Majali, the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Gianfranco Fini, and the Speaker of the Moroccan Parliament, Mustapha Mansouri.

In all these exchanges I have always made it clear that the European Parliament fully and entirely supports the demands made by the Council of Ministers on behalf of the European Union, which were confirmed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution of 8 January.

It is disheartening, ladies and gentlemen, that this legally binding resolution should have been flouted by both parties to the conflict – Israel and Hamas.

- There must be an immediate, lasting ceasefire. This ceasefire must be achieved with Egypt as mediator and with the involvement of all the players.
- There must be immediate, unimpeded access for humanitarian aid, and the United Nations Work and Relief Agency (UNRWA) must be allowed to continue its humanitarian activities without hindrance. And, I should like to add, not for only three hours a day!

If even the humanitarian organisations and the United Nations have to stop their work because the warring parties do not respect their neutrality, we have reached a low point indeed in international-law and human terms – one that we cannot accept!

- The third demand is an intensification of the peace process. The only workable basis for a lasting peace is and remains a two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine as separate sovereign states within secure borders.

The European Union, together with the members of the Quartet, the moderate Arab partners and all parties to the conflict, under the aegis of the United Nations, must bring about a rapid resumption of the peace negotiations. A comprehensive solution also means, of course, that the Palestinian factions must be reconciled.

On this point in particular we must question the approach we have adopted up to now to the so-called peace process.

Despite the admittedly difficult context and the almost imperceptible rate of progress, until a few weeks ago we could still assume that the underlying mindset was one of negotiation. The international community and, in the forefront, we as the European Union were accompanying the negotiations with our strong commitment and providing financial help with creating the framework conditions for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

But was our commitment strong enough in political terms? This is the question we must ask ourselves. We now find ourselves in a situation where the mindset is one of escalation. Understandably, in times of crisis management one tends to think in the short term. Our direct need is, indeed, for an immediate ceasefire and a total withdrawal of the Israeli forces, as called for also by the United Nations Security Council.

The experiences of the past decades have taught us that peace in the Middle East cannot come from the region alone. However, it will also not be possible without reconciliation between the hostile parties to the conflict.

That is why, more than ever before, the international community must be willing to promote peace in the Middle East, so that the painful events of past decades do not continue to generate painful experiences in the decades to come.

International forces can and must help to guarantee a ceasefire. That is why we must make every effort to ensure that the Franco-Egyptian plan to deploy an international mechanism to secure the borders of Gaza is truly successful. And, of course, a key priority must be to prevent the smuggling of rockets and weapons. The European Union announced right at the beginning of the Annapolis Process, in its action strategy paper, that it was prepared for this form of involvement.

But let me stress one thing in particular: deploying European and international security forces must not serve only to silence the weapons in the short term.

It must be part of a clear political goal – the goal of creating the confidence needed in order for the peace talks to come to a successful conclusion by guaranteeing security for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

That would mean that the deployment of troops, which can only make sense with a robust mandate, would step up the political pressure on all sides to reach a peace settlement.

More is needed than the oft-repeated affirmation of our belief in peace. What is needed is a willingness not only to strive after peace, but also to make peace, and to make peace before the hatred built up over decades escalates further into a great conflagration.

Let me conclude by reminding you, ladies and gentlemen, that 2008 was the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. I remind you of the huge efforts on the part of this Parliament to make that year into a vehicle of hope and to lay down political markers emphasising that the clash of cultures is not an immutable law of nature.

Worldwide reactions to the war in Gaza show how quickly efforts to achieve intercultural dialogue can be destroyed if they are overtaken by the reality of the images we see daily on the news. Worse still, this reality plays into the hands of extremists and fundamentalists, whose objective is not peace, but a continuing escalation of the spiral of confrontation.

Violence begets more violence. This truth cannot be repeated often enough.

Only dialogue and negotiation can lead us out of the crisis. Neither is an end in itself, but both must be courageously pursued with the aim of enabling the people of Israel and Palestine to live in real safety, in peace and with their human dignity intact.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention!