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DELEGATION TO THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

MEETING

Wednesday, 6 July 2005
Strasbourg

MINUTES

Draft agenda

1. Adoption of draft agenda PE 351.055
2. Approval of minutes of meeting of 21 April 2005 PE 350.998
3. Chairman's announcements
 - Results of visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories.
With the participation of the Delegation for relations with the Palestinian Legislative Council -
chairman: Adamos ADAMOU and
Jana HYBÁŠKOVÁ, chairman of the Delegation for relations with Israel
4. Debate
5. Exchange of views with Anneli JÄÄTTEENMÄKI, rapporteur for 'the Barcelona process revisited'
6. Other business

Minutes

1. The draft agenda was adopted.
2. The minutes of the meeting of 21 April 2005 were approved.

3. Chairman's announcements:

The President of the European Parliament and of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly, **Josep Borrell**, summarised the results of the visit to the Middle East of 27-29 June 2005. He stressed the major political significance of the meetings with the two sides and the visits to the Knesset and the Palestinian Legislative Council, at which the resolutions adopted by the EP had been presented.

The President's speech concerned three main points:

1. The meetings with the Israeli authorities:

The main subject discussed was the projected withdrawal from Gaza - a process generating anxiety and controversy within Israel, especially inside the conservative Likud party. However one might evaluate the reasons for the Israeli government's decision, it had to be stressed that for the first time Israel has made a unilateral decision to withdraw from the settlements.

This initiative contrasted visibly with the process of settlement and building on the West Bank, whose extremely fast rhythm had been noted by the delegation.

During the meeting with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and General Aila, the High Representative of the Israeli National Security Council, the issue of continuing the withdrawal process post-Gaza was discussed. This subject was at all moments kept in mind ('Gaza first or Gaza last').

Mr Sharon was more than clear on this point: first and foremost, the withdrawal from Gaza had to be a success. The point was to show that Israel was withdrawing voluntarily and was not being forced out. Israel would firmly oppose anything to the contrary.

Secondly, it was essential to obtain 'all guarantees' that the Palestinian National Authority was in control of events, had disarmed Hamas and had put a stop to terrorism.

Finally, Mr Sharon said that he was at present in a 'pre-road map' situation, and could not, therefore, make any official commitment regarding future developments.

2. The meetings with the Palestinian authorities:

The Palestinian attitude to the withdrawal from Gaza was ambivalent. The Palestinian leaders could certainly not afford to be seen to be against, but this put them in a delicate position: they were concerned over both the reasons for the decision to withdraw and the future development of the process. There were also a number of issues relating to the frontiers and to communication between Gaza and the West Bank which still had to be settled with the Israeli authorities.

Finally, there was a major long-term problem concerning the generation of economic activities. According to a World Bank report, unless minimum conditions were ensured for the movement of people, resources and investments, Gaza would be no better than a 'black hole'.

3. The possible holding of an extraordinary EMPA meeting in Palestine:

Mr Sharon apart, all the Israeli authorities were reticent about such an initiative. They invoked security as a pretext, even if their real motivations had more to do with the political content of the meeting, since it would take on a different symbolic colouring if held in Palestine. However, Mr Sharon had asked for time to examine the matter and had promised a reply.

Regarding logistics, the only possible venue seemed at present to be Ramallah. At all events, it was necessary to await a final reply from the Israeli government.

Should it prove impossible to meet in the Palestinian territories, the possible alternatives could include:

- Sharm-el-Sheik (Egypt) - near the conflict zone;
- Nicosia (Cyprus) - in the middle of another conflict zone;
- another Mediterranean location, e.g. Morocco,

Finally, the President recalled the visit to Beer Sheva University and the debate held there on uneven territorial development, the settlement of unpopulated areas and water management.

Adamos Adamou spoke on the meetings with the Israeli authorities, especially with regard to the criticisms expressed vis-à-vis the EU, which had at several points been charged with an excessively partial attitude to the conflict. He also expressed doubts as to Mr Sharon's willingness to withdraw totally from Gaza. He felt that a total withdrawal from the settlements would undermine Israel's security. Concerning the free movement of people and goods, Mr Sharon had not appeared enthusiastic over the construction of the airport, but seemed to have no objections to the port.

Mr Abbas, the President of the Palestinian National Authority, said he had been made aware of the EP's concerns regarding the postponement of the elections and the reintroduction of the death penalty. He invoked legislative grounds for postponing the elections, which, he assured those present, would be held in late December or early January. He had committed himself to a change in the law on capital punishment. He added that critical voices had been raised over the meetings between certain Member States and Hamas, apparently held in connection with the local elections. Finally, he mentioned (once more) Parliament's resolution on the wall.

Jana Hybášková reiterated Parliament's desire for the APEM to meet in Ramallah. She was, however, not sure how this could be achieved in view of the Israeli authorities' hostility.

She went on to stress the importance of security in Israel and Palestine, as one of the key factors for the pursuit of the peace process.

4. Debate

The three main subjects were:

1. The viability of Gaza post-withdrawal;
2. The continuation of the peace process after Gaza;
3. The extraordinary APEM meeting.

On Gaza, the view was expressed that the EP and the APEM should concentrate their efforts on ensuring the territory's access to the outside world and its economic viability, so as to prevent extremism feeding on internal tensions.

On the continuation of the peace process, it was several times stated that withdrawal from Gaza should not be seen as a reason for diverging from the road map: rather, it should be considered the first step towards creating a Palestinian state in the full sense of the word. The EP and the APEM could offer significant support, especially for the organisation of the forthcoming Palestinian elections.

The subject on which the debate was most heated was the venue for the extraordinary APEM meeting. Some Members favoured maintaining Ramallah (Mrs Morgantini, Mr Carnero, Mrs Napolitano), despite both the logistic problems and their full awareness of the need to avoid conflicting with the Israeli authorities on the matter. Mrs Napolitano proposed splitting the meeting into two and holding, say, part in Ramallah and part in Tel Aviv.

Other Members favoured alternative solutions, arguing that Ramallah was no longer viable, in the light of Israel's opposition and the need to avoid provocation (Mr Hammerstein, Mr Cesa, Mrs Kratsa, Mr Kasoulides). Another reason for caution, they felt, was the risk that certain delegations such as the Syrian one might not take part in the extraordinary meeting.

Beirut, Seville, Barcelona, Nicosia and Brussels were suggested as alternatives. Mr Kasoulides said that the Cypriot government would be willing to host the meeting, provided it was not held in the second half of November.

It was stressed that a final decision would have to be reached as soon as possible.

5. Exchange of views with Anneli JÄÄTTEENMÄKI

Anneli Jäätteenmäki outlined her own-initiative report for AFET on the Barcelona process. She stressed the difficulty of evaluating the achievements of the past and, above all, defining objectives for the future, and asked all members to cooperate on the matter.

She set out the following priorities: security in the region; economic stability; investment in education, especially for women; human rights and democracy; and the creation of a sustainable social model.

Mme Jäätteenmäki said she wished to establish close cooperation with the delegation to APEM and would welcome its members' suggestions.

Concerning AFET's calendar of activities, she said there would be a hearing on human rights and a seminar on education, training, mobility and the challenges of terrorism. Her draft report was expected to be ready for the end of August, so that it could be examined in committee and at the October 2005 part-session.