



PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE LA MEDITERRANEE
الجمعية البرلمانية للبحر الأبيض المتوسط

**4th Meeting of the Third Standing Committee on Dialogue among
Civilisations and Human Rights**

Assembly of the Republic of Portugal
24-26 June 2009 – Lisbon, Portugal

Executive Report

Friday, 26 June 2009

4th Meeting, Third Standing Committee on Dialogue among Civilisations and Human Rights

Hon. Askin Asan (Turkey), standing in for President Hon. Titna Alaoui due to local commitments in Algeria, chaired the 4th Meeting of the 3rd Standing Committee in her capacity as its Vice President. She opened the day's discussions and put the agenda up for adoption.

Thereafter, the agenda was adopted.

Summarising the activities of the 3rd Standing Committee so far this year, Hon. Asan commented that the Committee had been very active in three areas: Migration, Gender and Equality Issues, and Dialogue of Cultures and Religions. Moreover, within the context of a meeting of the STF on Dialogue of Cultures and Religions, held in Rome in March, PAM had visited Assisi, had been received by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, and an audience with Pope Benedict XVI had been organized. Addressing the PAM delegates as a guest speaker at the event, Reverend Father Bernard Ardura, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture of the Holy See, had complimented PAM for its contributions to dialogue.

Hon. Asan then invited the Rapporteurs to present the work of their respective Special Task Forces.

a) STF on Migration: Hon. Mahmoud Muhaidat (Jordan)

In his report, which focused on forced migration, Hon. Muhaidat stated that all Mediterranean countries were concerned in some way by migration, whether they be countries of origin, transit or destination, and that migration should be seen as an asset in the region. Unfortunately, we are still experiencing difficulties in managing migratory flows, which are exacerbated by the current economic situation. While well-managed legal migration can be beneficial, illegal migration poses a threat to our societies because it is channelled by organized criminal networks and thus results in the exploitation of migrants. The report identifies three root causes of forced migration: conflict-induced migration, development-induced migration, and lastly, disaster and climate change-induced migration. It argues that regardless of the causes of forced migration, all migrants should be guaranteed basic human rights and legal protection, especially women and children, as they are the most vulnerable categories.

Debate

The Palestinian delegation called for the rights of Palestinian “forced migrants” to be respected and for their return to their territories, which should be enforced in accordance with UNGA Resolution 194 of 11 December 1948. The Jordanian delegation suggested that it was important to mention that Israel was a divided country with internal conflicts between extremists and moderates. The Algerian delegation suggested that Muslim authorities generally needed to confront the question of forced migration. The Slovenian delegation argued that migration was a universal issue that touched all Mediterranean states regardless of religion, and that ultimately our goal was to create the conditions for avoiding future large-scale displacements. To this end, there was an urgent need for international legislation, and the EU needed to adopt legislation that was more compatible with UN ideals and less restrictive. The current EU legislative framework had built a wall around Europe and is based on the philosophy that migration is a threat. It was time to address the root causes of migration from a humanitarian perspective. The Algerian delegation suggested that the issue of the “brain drain” phenomenon should also be dealt with, for example, there is a considerable exodus of young qualified people from the Maghreb towards Canada. The Serbian delegation referred to its own problem of forced migration, and that it is currently the country with the highest level of forced migration in Europe, which is an issue that is not sufficiently noted by PAM. Forced migrants have come to Serbia from Croatia, Bosnia, as well as internally. The delegation suggested setting up a study group to deal with the question of these migrations in the West Balkans. Most migrants are Serbs, but there are also Muslims, Bosnians, Croats and Gypsies.

Hon. Muhaidat agreed that this study could be the basis for the future work of the group. He argued that the so-called “brain drain” was not a form of forced migration as such, and argued that migration to Canada was not a Mediterranean issue. It was suggested that reference to Palestine could be made in a footnote to the resolution.

The resolution and report were endorsed.

b) STF on Gender and Equality Issues: Hon. Askin Asan (Turkey) and Hon. Houda Bizid-Blaiech (Tunisia)

Hon. Asan explained that this STF had given special attention to women in political life in the Mediterranean, and the report laid down the pre-requisites for increased participation of women in political life, as well as mapped out the constraints hindering their participation: lack of financial resources, lack of knowledge – illiteracy of women was still a problem for some Mediterranean States -, discriminatory culture and social reality – competing family needs. The report also highlighted the status of women in Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey. Hon Bizid-Blaiech explained that Arab Muslim countries could achieve similar results to those attained in the North Mediterranean countries, citing the case of Tunisia, which has a pertinent history of promoting the freedom of women. To date, it is the only Muslim country to have abolished polygamy from its statutes. Discrimination against women is also prohibited by the Code on Individual Status, but more importantly, the current position of women is driven by four factors: political will (there must be at least 30% female representation in local/national elections); the fight against illiteracy (schooling is compulsory and free); reproductive issues (contraceptives are provided freely to allow women to choose their destiny); and the existence of an associative fabric campaigning for women’s rights.

Debate

Mrs. Asma Chraïbi, from the Moroccan Ministry responsible for the Moroccan community abroad, was welcomed by the Co-Rapporteurs and gave an update to her presentation made in Rome on the situation of Moroccan women in politics following recent local elections in March 2009. Morocco has achieved the figure of 12% female representation at local elections, increasing from 0.2%. When the tools exist and there is a political will, significant objectives can be attained. She also argued that women needed to become qualified and more competent. The Palestinian delegation maintained that women also needed to empower themselves, and it was not just a question of political will. Kuwait had passed anti-discriminatory legislation, and there were now four women elected within the Kuwaiti Parliament. The delegation also asked for the report to make special consideration of the plight of Palestinian women. The Algerian delegation commented that progress had been made towards promoting equality of women, with the government recently abolishing a law that forbade divorced women from applying for housing, and requiring former husbands to pay maintenance. The new legislation also recognises a child of an Algerian mother with an unknown father as Algerian.

Hon. Asan agreed to make special reference to the plight of Palestinian women in the part of her reports that refers to women in armed conflict, and suggested inviting Palestinian women to recount their experiences to the PAM members.

The resolution and report were adopted.

c) STF on Dialogue of Cultures and religions: Hon. Sonia Sanfona (Portugal)

Hon. Sanfona began by saying that following the success of the first report and the adoption of the Fez Programme, it was decided that this STF should continue its work in the direction of building on dialogue through tolerance and mutual understanding, focusing on our common characteristics. The STF met in Rome in March to debate on interreligious dialogue. Here a delegation was received by Pope Benedict XVI, and the participants at the meeting met with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican Secretary of State, and later, the Bishop of Assisi, Mons. Domenico Sorrentino. Under the auspices of this STF, the Mediterranean Day has been instituted, which is now celebrated throughout the region on the 21st of March every year. Moreover, a PAM Prize has been set up, which is awarded to people/organizations/institutions who promote cultural and religious dialogue, and was first awarded to French orchestral conductor Philippe Bender in 2008. The STF has also met with the Moroccan Parliament with the purpose of setting up a Mediterranean journalists' network to collaborate on media perceptions. Finally, she stated that the STF has drawn up a letter of engagement whereby PAM delegations pledge to promote intercultural and interreligious dialogue through their respective parliaments – including youth parliaments – and to call for a full debate on the subject within their national parliaments. In this respect, Hon. Sanfona emphasised the importance of being close to youths, teaching them respect for diversity and tolerance. The draft resolution reiterates the above points and also calls on further research to be carried out on the role of religions in the Balkans.

Debate

The Palestinian delegation emphasised the restrictions on freedom of religion in Palestine and thought that the report should mention this, as well as make reference to its national monuments, especially in light of the Speaker of the Knesset, H.E. Reuven Rivlin, confirming during his

interview with PAM his wish for Israel to be a Jewish State. The Slovenian delegation offered to organize, as soon as possible, a symposium at the Euromed University where the subject of freedom of religion and free access to holy sites for purposes of worship could be discussed. The Jordanian delegation referred to the fact that in addition to religious/historical monuments, schools had also been destroyed in Palestine. The Tunisian delegation thought that if we refer to the fundamentalism of making Israel more Jewish, PAM would be moving away from its inter-religious aims, and that it was important to remember that in Israel there are also those people who promote peace.

Hon. Sanfona agreed that it was important to examine the issue of free access to and conservation of holy sites, but that this work should be carried out regardless of nationality or religion. From the perspective of education, everyone should have full access to education and knowledge in order to base their lives on life-long-learning. This Assembly has the responsibility of appealing to different governments and encouraging them to make access to education universal. Hon. Sanfona did not think it appropriate to refer specifically to the situation of Palestine since there had been a fact-finding mission to the area and a report drafted on the conclusions drawn.

The draft resolution and report were endorsed.

Hon. Askin Asan confirmed that the delegations had agreed to urge our governments to debate the issue of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue through the letter of engagement. The letter of engagement drafted by the Portuguese delegation to this end was signed by the following delegations present at the meeting: Algeria, Jordan, Libya, Malta, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey.

3rd Standing Committee key objectives and dates for 2010

Hon. Asan then stated the proposals for the work of the Committee in 2010:

- To set up a Special Task Force on interreligious dialogue in the Balkans;
- Completion of the report on women in decision-making positions in the Mediterranean;
- Possible organization of new hearings with experts from different countries to get their perspectives on the situation of women in the Mediterranean;
- Possible organization of a joint STF meeting, together with the 1st Standing Committee, on the issue of migration to discuss forced migration more in depth;

The provisional calendar for the 3rd Standing Committee for 2010 is the following:

- February 2010 - Syria: joint meeting of some of the STFs (TBC);
- March 2010 – Nice, France: joint meeting of some of the STFs;
- June 2010 - Serbia: 5th meeting of the Standing Committees.

Finally, the Vice President of the 3rd Standing Committee reminded the delegates that the 4th Plenary Session of the Assembly would be held from 23-24 October in Istanbul, Turkey, along with the 1st meeting of the Secretaries General of the PAM Member States on the 25th.

Commitment to an “outreach and communications” strategy: introducing PAM to the media environment and all other stakeholders

Hon. George Vella (Malta) presented, on behalf of Hon. Jesmond Mugliett (Malta), an overview of the work of the Communications Office of the PAM Secretariat so far. He emphasised that there is increasing competition for information in today’s society and making an impact is not easy. PAM has therefore decided to initiate contacts with national parliaments and civil society, but this is still in its formative stages. Nonetheless, PAM has a responsibility to outreach as do our national delegations, so our work must not stop here. National delegations are the driving force behind PAM. They are the essential bridge between PAM and national and local institutions, creating a two-way communications process and interaction channel. PAM needs to work harder to involve our national parliaments. This question will be dealt with at the first meeting of the Secretaries General of the PAM Member Assemblies in Istanbul. A communication channel with governments is also needed. As regards our communications window, the essence of PAM is the welfare of Mediterranean citizens. This message has to come across at all levels of our work and at all times. Websites are interfaces of communication, but the internet still divides us because not all people have access. Competition for space in the media has reached unprecedented levels. It is very difficult to get into the international press, but PAM is slowly gaining the position it deserves. To continue to improve upon these initiatives, however, we need a more specific and dedicated budget. The PAM graduate program for young academics who wish to focus on regional issues could also be established, but funds would be needed for its setting up. Finally, Hon. Vella mentioned that PAM has embarked upon the process of becoming an Observer to the UN General Assembly.

The Secretary General informed the delegates that, at the request of Vice President Senator Francesco Maria Amoruso (Italy), a proposal has been tabled in front of the Italian Parliament towards officially recognising Mediterranean Day by law.

As regards the PAM Prize, Dr. Piazzì asked for the delegations to submit the names of people to be included in the list of potential candidates. He also encouraged members to organize prize-giving ceremonies in their respective countries to contribute towards enhancing PAM’s visibility.

Hon. Asan thanked the Portuguese Parliament and delegation for its marvellous organization, as well as the participants for their contributions, the PAM Secretariat and interpreters for their hard work and support during the three day meeting.

The session was declared closed.