



Brussels: Public Hearing with Tony Blair on Middle East Peace and Development Prospects

22 March 2010

The European Parliament's Committee on Development (DEVE) on 22 March 2010 held a public hearing on 'Bridge Building and Development in Palestine', with the participation of Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister and Representative of the Quartet on the Middle East (EU, UN, United States and Russian Federation), as well as representatives from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNWRA), the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), the Israel-Palestine chamber of commerce, and the Israel-Palestine centre for information. Chaired by Vice Chair of DEVE and PNoWB Board Member, Ms. Corina Cretu, the event in Brussels was an opportunity for Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to exchange the latest information and their views on economic and social development, the humanitarian situation and efforts to foster Israeli-Palestinian cooperation.

The event focused largely on how economic co-operation could restart the stalled Middle East peace process. There was a consensus between David Simha, Vice-president of the Israeli-Palestinian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Hanna Siniora, from the Israel-Palestinian Centre for Research and Information, that business communities on both sides are willing to strive for peace and development. Mr. Simha pointed out that by building business relationships, you can build mutual trust and lasting cooperation, which can lead to peace from the bottom up. Mr. Siniora called the blockades in Gaza and the West Bank a punishment for the Palestinian people. He insisted that road blocks – of which there are currently 600 across the West Bank – be lifted as they restrict Palestinian business development, including in the area of pharmaceuticals. Mr. Siniora also warned that currently trade between Gaza and Egypt benefits Hamas and not the Palestinian authority.

Barbara Shenstone, West Bank Field Director for UNRWA, expressed concern on the general trend towards impoverishment in the Palestinian Territories. She noted that refugees are particularly vulnerable in this situation. Most aid reaching the region is humanitarian aid focused on primary education and emergency healthcare. Checkpoints restrict the movement of people and goods as well as the movement of real trade towards areas outside Gaza and the West Bank. Unemployment rates remain high with "pockets of acute poverty" throughout the region. According to Ms. Shenstone, it is too early to read signs of development as a trend towards economic growth.

The large presence of MEPs at the hearing was a testimony to continued interest in the Israeli-Palestine question. Mr. Blair's keynote address put a strong emphasis on capacity building in Palestine, most notably in regard to security issues and governance. According to Mr. Blair, the two-state solution is the only solution. However, this would require a security guarantee for Israel and the guarantee of an independent state for Palestine.

Mr. Blair reported that there has been some economic growth in 2009; however, the occupation still prevents the region from developing fully. He stressed the need for imminent proximity talks between Israel and Palestine and for the removal of border restrictions to allow international support to reach areas in need and to foster the growth of the Palestinian economy.

This was Mr. Blair’s second intervention as the Quartet’s representative at the European Parliament. In 2008, he said the European Union (EU) - a major international donor – “should act as a broker for peace”. This time, he strengthened this statement by stating that the EU has to play a political role in capacity and trust building. However, it was apparent that a number of MEPs were disappointed with the lack of progress and that they only partly shared Mr. Blair’s optimism on what has been achieved so far. Development Committee Chair Eva Joly asked why the two states have not yet been declared unilaterally. Another MEP suggested applying the Dayton Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Israeli-Palestinian question. Mr. Blair responded that "the only solution which will last is the one negotiated".

An MEP asked Mr. Blair if Hamas was capable of engaging in “a journey leading to peace and democracy”. A similar question had also been raised back in 2008. Mr. Blair responded that if there is strong momentum behind the process and a realistic prospect of achieving peace, Hamas would have to decide whether to support it or to stand apart, but he added that the majority of people in Gaza and West Bank are behind a two-state solution.

MEPs voiced their concern about the casualties and violence in the region, as well as about Palestinians’ limited capacity to develop in most of the area, as around 60% is administered by Israel (referred to as Area C). Palestinians cannot use the area in any way without Israeli permission. Mr. Blair reiterated capacity-building as a solution. In his view, the only way to lift the restrictions on Palestinians’ life and economy is through a strong Palestinian ability to govern the territory. Despite continued challenges, he remained convinced by the Palestinian Authority's August 2009 plan to build the Palestinian state within 24 months.

UN statistics on the occupied Palestinian Territories (2007)

Human Development Index 110/219
(comparison: Turkmenistan: 109/219; Indonesia: 111/219)

Economic

| | |
|-------------------|--------------|
| GDP per capita | 1,358.5 US\$ |
| Unemployment Rate | 21,3% |

Demographic/Social

| | |
|---|--------------|
| Life expectancy at birth | |
| 2005 - 2010 (women/men) | 75 years |
| Population | 4,01 million |
| Population Growth Rate | |
| 2005 - 2010 (per annum) | 3,2% |
| Total Fertility Rate (Births Per Woman) | 5.1 |
| Population Doubling Time (70/growth rate) | 18,9 years |
| Adult literacy rate (aged 15 and above) | 93,8% |

(Source: UN Data)

UN statistics on Israel (2007)

Human Development Index 27/219
(comparison: Republic of Korea: 26/219; Andorra: 28/219)

Economic

| | |
|-------------------|---------------|
| GDP per capita | 22,835.0 US\$ |
| Unemployment Rate | 19,2% |

Demographic/Social

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Life expectancy at birth | |
| 2005 - 2010 (women/men) | 80,7 years |
| Population | 6,9 million |
| Population Growth Rate | |
| 2005 - 2010 (per annum) | 1,5% |
| Total Fertility Rate (Births Per Woman) | 2.8 |
| Population Doubling Time (70/growth rate) | 46.7 years |
| Adult literacy rate (aged 15 and above) | 97,1% |

(Source: UN Data)