

Wednesday, 12 October 2005 - Brussels

Situation in Ethiopia

Ana Maria Gomes (PSE). - (PT) No, Mr President, I speak to the House not, unfortunately, as an author, but as a Member of the House and as head of the EU election observation mission to Ethiopia. The elections afforded the opposition and all of Ethiopian society an unprecedented voice, which is to Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's credit. The presence of international observers, of which our mission was the most significant in terms of numbers and professional commitment, was a key factor in instilling confidence among the electorate, who turned out in their droves and 90% voted. The delegation sent by Parliament felt the sustained applause of voters queuing up on 15 May and for this reason the EU's electoral mission feels an enormous responsibility. It is crucial that the Ethiopian people have their expectations of true election results fulfilled and the mission will do all it can to ensure that this happens.

Nobody can know for sure what the election results will be because the process got into serious difficulty at the stage of counting the ballot papers. In addition to the delays in publishing the results, there were a large number of complaints from all parties, including the party in government. Concern among the population with regard to those delays and complaints was at the root of the tragic events of 6, 7 and 8 June, on which the mission immediately spoke out publicly. We called at the time for an independent inquiry and we continue to do so. Specifically, we call on the government to release those held in breach of constitutional guarantees and of human rights; we call for elected candidates and other opposition representatives, along with human rights campaigners, to be allowed the freedom to perform their duties; we call for media freedom and for opposition representatives to be allowed access to the media; we called then and call now on the opposition to hold back and discourage others from carrying out or calling for an insurgency, from calling for people to break constitutional law and from fomenting inter-ethnic conflict, which will ultimately only help those with a vested interest in ensuring that the results of the popular vote are never disclosed, those who, in turn, would stop at nothing to force the electoral process to be disrupted, leading to a spiral of violence and economic and political chaos; we call on both sides - government and opposition - to comply fully with the 10 June Agreement aimed at addressing complaints, which is backed by the main contributors, including the Member States.

At this point I wish to pay tribute to the representative of the Commission, who played - and continues to play - an outstanding role in Addis Ababa. Our mission has been restructured to meet requests from both sides that we should observe this process of looking into complaints and I shall therefore be back in Addis Ababa next week.

I shall finish, Mr President, by saying that the situation is very delicately and dangerously poised. The risk of civil war is not mere rhetoric. I have just heard the news that the main opposition announced this morning that it is pulling out of the complaint investigation process due to its representatives allegedly being obstructed. Accordingly, any demonstrations of interest in the Ethiopian process, however constructive or well-intentioned they may be, and this is clearly the case of this Parliament initiative, could be taken the wrong way, or could be used for nefarious purposes by those who have a vested interest in breaking up the democratisation process in Ethiopia.

My duties as head of the electoral observation mission have not finished. It is an independent mission, and the work is not yet done. I therefore ask Parliament to appreciate that I feel it is my duty not to take part in the vote on this resolution.