

Wednesday, 12 March 2008 - Strasbourg

The European Union's role in Iraq (debate)

Ana Maria Gomes, rapporteur . – (PT) Madam President, as this House is about to vote on a report on the European Union's role in Iraq, it is important to look at some of the lessons learnt from the history of that country. On 16 March it will be 20 years since the chemical attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja, one of the most deadly operations in the Anfal genocidal campaign conducted by the forces of Saddam Hussein against his own people. Halabja was not a one-off; there were many Halabjas throughout Iraq. For decades, given the passivity and occasional connivance of European governments, Saddam Hussein's regime subjected the Iraqi people to a strategy of systematic brutalisation with devastating consequences which are still being felt today. That is why, as rapporteur, I wanted the fundamental axiom of this report to be the moral and legal responsibility of Europe towards the Iraqi people. No people have suffered more in recent decades and few countries are strategically more important to Europe's security.

Besides being a matter of duty, Europe must realise that it has an interest in consolidating a federal and democratic Iraq where the rule of law prevails and where human rights are respected, including the rights of women. In 2003 my party, the Portuguese Socialist Party, and myself personally were opposed to the decision to invade Iraq supported by the then Prime Minister of my country, Mr Durão Barroso. I still maintain this position. However, this report must not be used to reiterate our well-known positions on an issue that has divided Europe in the past. This House is being called on to give its opinion on the present and future contribution of the European Union to a secure, prosperous and democratic Iraq that is at peace with its neighbours.

It was with this in mind that I made two trips to Iraq in January and February, in preparation for this report. One trip was to Baghdad, Nassiria and the Marshlands region, and the other was to Kurdistan in the north of the country. With a budget of 48 billion dollars for 2008, what Iraq is not lacking is money. It does not need any more budget support or soft loans. What Iraq needs and what Iraqis are asking for is technical assistance and institutional empowerment so that the State and civil society can function properly and so that the country's vast resources can be put to good use for the population, including the millions of internally displaced persons and refugees in neighbouring countries.

This report does not just encourage greater involvement of the EU in Iraq. We also demand that the EU's presence in Iraq be governed by transparency, visibility and efficiency. Parliament is delighted to observe the Commission's growing concern about perfecting the use of European funds in Iraq in an extremely difficult context. In this respect, we feel that the Commission and the Member States can and must have a greater presence on the ground, with personnel and projects, particularly in those areas of the country where the security situation permits this, as is the case with the Kurdish region. On the other hand, we demand regulation of contracts for private military and security companies. I would stress that in this report the European Parliament is calling for the first time for the establishment of clear guidelines on the use of these companies by EU institutions.

The main message of this report, which must be conveyed to the Commission, the Council, European companies, non-governmental organisations and public opinion, is as follows: Europe today has a unique opportunity to contribute positively to the future of Iraq and, as a result, the region. The interaction with the Commission during the preparation of this report and the consensus reached on this report in the Committee on Foreign Affairs have convinced me that Europe is prepared to take on this challenge. I must end by personally thanking all my fellow Members who proposed amendments and suggestions and in particular the shadow rapporteurs, Mrs Hybášková, Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne, Mr Brie and Mr Özdemir for their contributions, which have greatly enriched this report.