

Pöttering takes peace message to Israeli Knesset

On day 3 of his visit to the Middle East President Pöttering addressed the Israeli Knesset and called for a "new start" in the region. He asked for consideration to be given to a joint peace conference, and reaffirmed Parliament's support for a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestine dispute. He spoke of the path of reconciliation that Europe had taken in the last 50 years as an example of creating peace and pledged to bring young people from all sides to the European Parliament in 2008.

During his visit to the region he had already held talks with several figures including Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and acting Israeli President and Speaker of the Knesset Dalia Itzik. On Thursday he travels to Amman to meet King Abdullah of Jordan.

Speaking to Israeli MPs he stressed the shared mutual heritage: "we respect Israel's heritage, which is part of our own European heritage" he told them. On the holocaust he spoke of the "unparalleled suffering" inflicted on the Jewish people.

"The region is once again in flames"

Turning to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute he said that "the region is once again in flames". He said that the European Parliament stands "shoulder to shoulder" with the Jewish and Palestinian people as they both "have the right to a secure existence".

He stressed that "Israel has a right to defend itself. However, I urge Israel to avoid reacting disproportionately" - a move that would affect "innocent victims among the civilian population". He told MEPs that "international law is binding on us all".

International initiatives

He suggested a "joint conference" to bring both sides - and the international community together. He asked "would it not be possible for Israel, the Palestinians, the Arab States and the Middle East Quartet to consider together the format and procedures for and the substance of such a conference?" Mr Pöttering also reiterated the European Parliament's position of the best hope for peace being "a two-state solution on the basis of the 1967 borders" on the basis of the 'land for peace' principle.

He reminded those present that it was not so long since Europe had been in state of war. "Fifty years ago, former enemies decided to set aside the mistrust, not to say hatred, that still existed at the time and to instead choose reconciliation" he said. He also urged Israel to use the opportunities presented by the Euro-Mediterranean parliamentary Assembly for reconciliation.

Parliament initiatives

President Pöttering asked for Israel support for an initiative the European Parliament would like to host to celebrate the 2008 "Year of Intercultural Dialogue". A meeting of young people from Israel, Palestine, the Arab States and Europe would be a way of bringing people together he urged. Continuing on the theme of young people he said that "peace begins with the education of our children" and called for a re-examination of school books to make them free of prejudice and stereotypes.

"Palestinian mothers and wives weep just as Israelis do"

Reflecting on the conditions he had seen during the tour of the West Bank and the Gaza strip on Monday and Tuesday he told MPs that "I was deeply shocked by the economic, social and humanitarian conditions which I saw there". Speaking of the need for funding to support vital services he said "I ask the Government of Israel: please release the Palestinian funds, of about 700 million dollars, which are based on customs revenue".

An important message of the speech was stressing the common humanity on both sides of the conflict. He told MPs that "the laughter of Palestinian schoolchildren is just as heart-warming as the laughter of Israeli schoolchildren" and that "Palestinian mothers and wives weep just as Israelis do, if their husbands have no work, or are in prison or dead".

Called for courage for a "new start"

During his address he also mentioned the inter-religious dialogue he had seen in Bethlehem. "This dialogue which aims to pull down the walls in people's hearts and minds is opposed by the wall that exists in reality". Also said that "holy places of religions should always be freely accessible". Finally he ended saying "we should have the courage to make a new start together".

Delegation and Plenary debate: support for restoring aid to Palestinians

Last week in Strasbourg MEPs debated the Middle East on 22 May and expressed grave concern at the escalation of violence in the Palestinian territories, Israel and Lebanon. During the debate a large majority of MEPs called for support for the Palestinian National Unity Government.

This came after a visit of a delegation in early May of MEPs to the Palestinian territories. They called for an end to the political and economic boycott of the Palestinian government.