

MALTESE PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION ATTENDS THE WINTER SESSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE – 25-29 JANUARY 2010

Debates on trafficking in human beings, detention of asylum seekers and irregular migrants, and on what Europe can do for Haiti were among the highlights of the winter session of Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) convened between 25-29 January 2010 in Strasbourg. The members who attended this part-session were the Hon. Francis Agius MP as leader of the Delegation, the Hon. Robert Arrigo MP, the Hon. Joe Debono Grech MP, the Hon. Marie Louise Coleiro MP and the Hon. Joseph Falzon MP.

At the opening of its plenary session on Monday 25th January 2010, the 318-member Parliamentary Assembly elected Mevlüt Çavusoglu (Turkey, EDG) as its new President. Mr Çavusoglu succeeds Lluís Maria de Puig (Spain, SOC) as the Assembly's 25th President. He is the first Turk to hold the office since Turkey's accession to the Council of Europe in August 1949.

During this Session:

All six Members of the Maltese Delegation to the PACE endorsed a declaration initiated by Mr Michael Aastrup Jensen, Chairman of the Danish Delegation, whereby they dissociated themselves from the recent ruling delivered by the European Court of Human Rights in respect of crucifixes in Italian classrooms. Amongst other considerations, the declaration expressed concern about how the ruling could affect the rights of countries with a state religion to display religious symbols in public spaces in general.

The Hon. Francis Agius was designated as an EPP/CD Group member on the Committee on the Honouring of obligations and commitments by member states of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee) for 2010.

The Hon. Joseph Falzon MP was elected Chairperson on the Sub-Committee on Sustainable Development which falls under the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs of the Council of Europe.

On Tuesday, the Parliamentary Assembly elected Guido Raimondi as judge to the European Court of Human Rights with respect to Italy. Judges are elected by the PACE from a list of three candidates nominated by each State which has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights.

Also on Tuesday, in his address to the Assembly, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Franco Frattini said that "close co-operation between Council of Europe, European Union and OSCE is absolutely necessary towards the globalisation of human rights". He was highlighting the relevance of international organisations' co-ordination in order to strengthen fundamental rights' protection in Europe and a common governance on migration policies.

In a resolution adopted during this part session, the Assembly called on Council of Europe member states which had not yet done so to sign and/or ratify the Council of Europe Convention on action against trafficking in human beings, and encouraged the European Union to accede to it. It also spoke out in favour of intensified co-operation with other international organisations, taking special care to avoid all risk of duplication between the different monitoring mechanisms. The parliamentarians also asked that the Group of independent experts responsible for looking after the implementation of the convention (GRETA) be able to command the financial and human resources needed for its activity. Finally, in line with the recommendations of Gisela Wurm (Austria, SOC), rapporteur of the Equal Opportunities Committee, the PACE proposed to organise a conference in 2010 on action against trafficking, involving all partners.

Later in the week the Assembly discussed the detention of asylum seekers and irregular migrants in Council of Europe member states and how this phenomenon has increased substantially in recent years. Following the consideration of this item, the PACE has set down guiding principles on the legality of detention and put forward a number of European rules governing minimum standards for conditions in detention centres which should be guaranteed by member states and adopted by the Committee of Ministers as European rules. Following the proposals by the rapporteur (Ana Catarina

Mendonça, Portugal, SOC), the parliamentarians encouraged member States to use alternatives to detention, such as placement in special establishments, release on bail/surety or electronic monitoring. <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta10/eRES1707.htm>.

On the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the President of the PACE stressed that remembering was the best way to prevent a repeat of the tragedy of the Holocaust. He reminded those present that under Resolution 60/7 of 2005, the United Nations General Assembly had declared 27 January as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Mr Çavusoglu said that 65 years ago, on 27 January 1945, the Soviet military liberated some 7,000 prisoners remaining in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland.

On Thursday, the morning's debate on current affairs focused on "What can Europe do for Haiti" following the tragic earthquake. During the discussion that ensued, a number of suggestions were put forward. Members present proposed that member states should work together to create an organisational chain ready to intervene immediately in any major natural catastrophe. Another proposal was that member states should co-ordinate the fair distribution of aid in order to avoid the situation recently witnessed in Haiti where earthquake survivors were fighting each other over the aid available.

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