



PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN
ASSEMBLEE PARLEMENTAIRE DE LA MEDITERRANEE

الجمعية البرلمانية للبحر الأبيض المتوسط

PAM Mission to Syria and Lebanon

28 June - 2 July 2013

Executive Report

Background and Objectives

The PAM Mission to Syria took place as part of PAM's institutional mandate and responsibility towards the citizens of its member states.

PAM's assistance in promoting confidence building measures, the protection of civilians and the facilitation of humanitarian assistance, as well as the necessity to keep Palestinian communities out of the internal conflict, was requested in the course of high-level meetings with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos, Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, and UNSG Envoy for the Middle East, Amb. Robert Serry, on the occasion of the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly and follow up consultations.

The basis for renewed direct cooperation between PAM and the Syrian Parliament were laid in Quito last March, on the margins of the 128th IPU Assembly.

In Rome, on 6 June 2013, the PAM Bureau, due to the urgency of the matter, unanimously decided to field this mission as a result of the postponement of the PAM Hearing, originally scheduled to take place on that day, to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighboring countries. The postponement was due to the holding, concurrently and at a very short notice, of a preparatory meeting of the intergovernmental conference "Geneva II", at the UN HQs in Geneva. The PAM Bureau decision also took into consideration the appeal by President Barroso of 5 June.

The PAM mission was intended to address the most pressing issues concerning humanitarian access and facilitation of aid delivery, as well as confidence building measures within the framework of the process for national reconciliation between the Syrian political parties in the internal conflict.

The visit included a number of high-level bilateral consultations in Damascus with members of the Syrian Parliament and Government, UN Agencies and foreign diplomatic representations. The PAM delegation also met with the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Lebanese National Assembly in Beirut.

PAM High-level Mission to Syria and Lebanon

28 June - 1 July 2013

Schedule

Friday 28 June

21:00 Arrival in Beirut

Saturday 29 June

10:00 Transfer to Damascus

17:00 Meetings at the Syrian Arab Republic People's Assembly with:

- 🕒 H.E. Mr. Mohammed Jihad Al-Laham - Speaker of the People's Assembly of Syria
- 🕒 Hon. Khaled Al Aboud- Member of the Bureau
- 🕒 Hon. Abd Al Mu'ty Mashlab - Member of the Bureau

18:00 Meeting with the following Chairpersons of Committees of the Syrian People's Assembly:

- 🕒 Hon. Dr. Fadia Deeb - Chairwoman of the Arab and Foreign Affairs Committee
- 🕒 Hon. Fayez al Sayegh - Chairman of the Press and Media Committee
- 🕒 Hon. Walid al Saleh - Chairman of the Directing and Guidance Committee
- 🕒 Hon. Omar Ousi - Chairman of the National Reconciliation Affairs Committee

20:30 Working Dinner with the Chairperson of the Foreign Relations Committee

Sunday 30 June

09:00 Meetings with Mr. Radhouane Nouicer - UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria and the representatives of the UN Humanitarian Agencies in Syria

11:00 H.E. Kinda Al Shammat - Minister of Social Affairs

12:00 H.E. Joseph Sweid - Minister of State for the Syrian Red Crescent Affairs

16:00 Field visit with UNHCR to a Center for displaced persons in the periphery of Damascus

Monday 1 July

09:00 H.E. Azamat Kulmuhametov - Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Syria

10:00 The Office of the UN/LAS Special Representative for Syria:

🌐 Mr. Elio Tamburi Quinteiro - Senior Political Affairs Officer

🌐 Mrs. Tamara Al-Zayyat - Political Affairs Officer

11:00 Monsignor Dr. Giorgio Chezza - Chargé d'affaires, Apostolic Nunciature in Syria

12:00 H.E. Mohsen Bilal - Former Minister of Information, and former Ambassador of Syria to Spain

13:30 Transfer to Lebanon

16:00 Arrival in Beirut

16:30 Hon. Abdellatif Zein - Chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Emigrants Committee at the Lebanese National Assembly

Tuesday 2 July

End of mission and departure from Lebanon

Summary of discussions

Based on the briefing for the mission entrusted to PAM, the delegation urged the Syrian Parliament and Government to assume their responsibilities in facilitating the delivery of the humanitarian assistance, increase the protection of all civilians and reduce the level of violence.

The PAM delegation raised openly, and in a very constructive way, with the Speaker and the Chairs of four of the main Committees of the Syrian Parliament (Arab & Foreign Affairs - Press and Media - National Reconciliation - Directing and Guidance) the bureaucratic, logistical and political obstacles for the delivery of humanitarian assistance all around Syria. These included, among others: the issuance of visas to humanitarian personnel, the number of national and international NGOs allowed to operate in the country; the delays experienced for customs clearance for relief goods; permission to travel to areas under control by the opposition and security for UN staff; the import and utilization of communication equipment by UN agencies; withholding of drugs and medicines by the Ministry of Health; the occasional harassment of humanitarian staff by both security/military personnel and, increasingly by armed opposition units; the coordination mechanisms between humanitarian agencies and the Syrian National High Relief Committee; the new rules imposed on bank accounts and forced conversion of foreign currency;

The current political situation in Syria was thoroughly discussed with the both the Speaker and the Chairperson of the Arab and Foreign Relations, Hon. Dr. Fadia Dib. She referred, inter alia, to the possibility of a new broad-based Government being in place in the coming months, with members from all different parties, with two main goals: achieving national reconciliation and paving the way for elections of 2014. A reshuffle of top positions in the Baath party was also envisaged.

In the two meetings held with the Minister of Social Affairs and the Minister of the Red Crescent, while listing all the above-mentioned impediments, PAM noted the improvement in coordination in the last 12 months, but stressed the urgent need to bridge the communication gap that was clearly occurring between the humanitarian agencies and the Syrian Government. In this regard, PAM proposed, and it was agreed, that frequent meetings shall be held between humanitarian agencies and the Syrian National High Relief Committee, both at the political and working levels, in order to address all logistical and bureaucratic problems that may hurdle or delay the delivery of humanitarian aid.

There was general consensus on the fact that the crisis in Syria will never be solved through military actions from any of the two sides. Ad hoc and specific confidence building initiatives must be undertaken by the international community to ensure dialogue and to push both sides to resume direct political negotiations. One of these basic measures to support political negotiations, is to reconsider any decision taken to supply arms to the Syrian parties in conflict.

These trust and confidence building measures, to include an amnesty and free speech/movement for opposition political leaders, shall, eventually, be able to lower the level of violence; pave the way for the "Geneva II" meeting, and raise the number of political options for the negotiating table.

UN agencies working on location all agreed on the importance to reconsider some of the sanctions imposed on Syria. They maintain that these sanctions are affecting negatively all attempts to improve the deteriorating humanitarian situation of the civil population at large, bearing no influence on the regime. The procurement, supply and delivery of food and medicine should be secured by all means. Problems were being experienced with contractors due to their fear to breach sanctions by selling food and medicines to humanitarian agencies in Syria. Contracts could not be honoured abroad due to foreign currency limitations, and procurement in Syria would deplete the local market creating additional suffering to the population.

The Office of the UN/LAS Special Representative to Syria also highlighted the extreme fragmentation of the military opposition, and the absence of any chain of command in the territories under their control, as being one of the main obstacles that they face in their endeavour in delivering humanitarian aid. This fact was supported by many examples of UN convoys being attacked and robbed in the areas under the control of the opposition. In the past they were able to travel to all areas of the country, including those occupied by the opposition. Now this is almost impossible due to security constraints.

UN officials raised the issue of those political activists, under suspicion of having contacts with the armed opposition, getting arrested, detained and interrogated by the Syrian security, mainly in Damascus and its surroundings, and going into what has been called a “black hole”, sometimes for unlimited time, without anyone informing their families about their conditions, till they are either released or sent to prison. This problem is getting worse and must be urgently addressed by controlling and giving clear orders to the various security bodies operating on behalf of the Syrian government.

Although sectarian confrontation has not been, so far, an imminent threat in the ongoing conflict, yet, the Office of Mr. Brahimi pointed out that some groups and individuals are trying to promote this sort of tension by means of terror, kidnapping and extortions, as it seems to be the case in the city of Aleppo by Islamic militants against the Armenian community, or for Christian priests being kidnapped or slaughtered.

The importance of depoliticizing the humanitarian assistance was discussed during the PAM meeting with the Russian Ambassador to Syria, H.E. Azamat Kulmuhametov. Russian authorities were experiencing the same problems as the UN in delivering humanitarian assistance. Cross-border operations, which he described in the perception of the Government in Damascus, as a clear violation of the Syrian sovereignty, had in his opinion a negative effect on the political developments on the ground. PAM SG suggested for the UN and the Russian Embassy to work together at finding common solutions to the obstacles in delivering relief aid and made reference to, among others, UNGA Res. 46/182 of 1991 which, in full respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of the State, refers to both cross border operations and allows the UN to negotiate with all parties in a conflict to facilitate humanitarian assistance to all those in need, when required.

The PAM delegation ended its mission in Damascus with an unscheduled meeting with H.E. Dr. Mohsen Bilal, former Syrian Minister of Information and former Ambassador of Syria to Spain. Dr. Bilal conveyed the appreciation of the people and Government of Syria for the PAM endeavours in facilitating humanitarian assistance and in promoting national reconciliation.

In Beirut, the PAM delegation met with Hon. Abdel Latif El Zein, Chairman of the Foreign Relation Committee of the Lebanese National Assembly. The developments in Syria based on the findings by the PAM delegation in Damascus, were discussed, and views were exchanged on the extent with which the crisis could affect Lebanon, if military operations had to reach Damascus. The PAM delegates took the opportunity to express to Hon. El Zein their gratitude for all the assistance and support extended to them by the Lebanese Parliament, both for the logistical and security aspects, to ensure the success of the PAM mission to Syria.

Conclusions and follow up action

At the conclusion of the meetings in Damascus, in a sum up with PAM Secretary General, the President of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Syrian Parliament indicated the firm determination of the Parliament to assist humanitarian agencies in addressing, with the relevant ministers and domestic security organizations, the bureaucratic obstacles hampering the smooth delivery of humanitarian assistance in the country, in the areas controlled by the Government, and to facilitate in any possible way that to other regions under opposition rule, and which has to transit through Government controlled corridors. At PAM's suggestion, the Committee's President, with her colleagues, will also meet regularly with UN humanitarian agencies to ensure a direct feed back of the effectiveness of parliamentary action and implement additional measures, as it might be required.

Noting with satisfaction the progress made over the last 12 months in the cooperation between UN agencies and the Government, PAM had however identified the lack of a regular dialogue between the two as a major obstacle to the effective and unimpeded delivery of relief aid. As requested by PAM, and agreed by the Government, UN humanitarian agencies will now meet with the Syrian Ministers of Social Affairs and the Red Crescent, both responsible for the Syrian National High Relief Committee, already on Monday 8 July. These high-level meetings, which should have a monthly frequency, are to be complemented by weekly meetings at the working level.

She also committed to organize as soon as possible a parliamentary hearing with national security entities to address the extremely important issue of illegal detention and inhuman treatment of relief workers and political opponents who are arrested, often with no news for several weeks, until they are either released or held in official prisons. Her action on this point is seen as part of those essential parliamentary efforts required to create a climate of trust and confidence with the political opposition.

The conviction, by both parties, that a military solution is at reach, undermines the efforts by the international community for a rapid and lasting political solution. The conflict is being pushed toward a dangerous radicalization, with extreme forms of violence and terror being practiced, especially from those foreign armed elements belonging to units close to al-Qaida modus operandi. For this reason, UN political officers stressed the absolute necessity for the international community not to supply any kind of armament to any of the parts in conflict, as a way to oblige them to sit round a table and negotiate a political solution. The absolute need exists to isolate the extremist movements, which infiltrated the opposition to the Syrian regime and terrorize the civil population, and establish a real dialogue with the legitimate political and military representatives of the opposition.

Protracted hostilities are having an enormous impact on the civilian population, which remains hostage of the war. Most of the individuals met in Damascus by the PAM delegation have warned about the attempts by some opposition parties to transform the military confrontation in a war between religions and ethnic groups. This is aggravated by the fact that many criminal groups, controlling pockets of the territory, make their living by means of threatening the population, which is pushed to abandon their homes, or by kidnapping, occupying and sacking private, commercial and public property, and stealing relief goods, medicines and food supplies. The association of ransom to kidnappings has become a very lucrative and common business. This has been related to the PAM delegation on several

occasions, by, inter alia, a number of women who are hosted in the IDPs Centres in the Damascus area. It was also highlighted how the infrastructure of the country, including hospitals, schools and industrial production facilities, has been destroyed to the extent that it will take not less than ten years to revert to the pre-war level of efficiency.

Talking to MPs in Damascus, it was evident that the absence of a dialogue between Syrian politicians and civil society on one hand, and with the international community on the other, is part of the problem in achieving a political solution. MPs, who had the impression of Syria being persecuted by the international community, were totally unaware of the discussions being held abroad, i.e. within the European Institutions, on the way to help assisting in finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis. They looked positively surprised when the PAM delegation shared with them the EU Joint Communication of 24 June 2013, which addressed in an objective way the various aspects of the crisis. It is therefore recommended that a pragmatic mechanism is established to exchange views and proposals with the Syrian Parliament, as an important tool of confidence building, which could facilitate national reconciliation. This should be done as soon as possible to advocate for and facilitate the open and safe participation of opposition political figures in the national debate, especially in view of the elections scheduled to take place in 2014.

In the course of the discussions with MPs, PAM SG was informed that a new Government will be installed in Damascus in two months time. The new Government should be representative of all the political parties and movements, opposition included, present in the country. This could represent a major chance for the country if coupled to increased security for the population.

PAM delegates were encouraged by the open and frank discussions with Syrian MPs and the Chairs of four key Parliamentary Committees. PAM dealt with a number of issues, and the delegation was critical of some of the policies implemented, especially those relating to arrests, detention and treatment of representatives of the opposition and pacifists. The Chairs of the Committees declared their readiness to use all their influence to give peace a chance, including by urging the Government to allow the unimpeded humanitarian access to all those in need regardless of their location, to allow freedom of expression to the political opposition members, and suggesting the launching of an amnesty as a sign of confidence building in the framework of national reconciliation.

On the issue of Palestinian refugees in Syria, PAM was requested throughout all the meetings in Damascus and Beirut to convey, in the loudest possible way, to both the President of Palestine and the High Commissioner of UNRWA, the necessity for them to continue stressing to the Palestinian communities not to be involved in the internal conflict.

At the meeting held in Damascus with UN agencies, it was suggested for PAM to assist them by convening in September, a couple of weeks before the UN General Assembly (UNGA), a PAM parliamentary hearing on the humanitarian crisis in Syria and the neighbouring countries. UN agencies also suggested to holding this PAM hearing in Amman, Jordan, which they consider as the ideal location to allow for a broader participation of UN representatives operating in Syria and in the neighbouring countries.

This hearing could therefore take place sometime in mid-September, prior to the PAM participation, as a Permanent Observer to the UNGA, to the High-level Segment of the 68th

Session of the UNGA, to be held in New York, from 24 September to 4 October 2013, and which will also be the occasion for PAM delegates to hold consultations in Washington DC. The conclusions of the PAM meeting in Amman will be brought to the attention of H.E. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Security Council and of relevant UN Senior Officials (DPA, OCHA and DPKO). PAM has already sought the agreement of the Jordanian Parliament, which holds the Presidency of the PAM 1st Standing Committee on Political Cooperation and Security Matters, to host this one-day regional parliamentary hearing in Amman.

All PAM Member Parliaments, including that of Syria (UN representatives in Damascus pointed out that Syrian officials still regularly travel to Jordan to attend UN meetings), would be invited to fully assume their responsibilities in promoting stability, confidence building and mobilizing the required resources, urging humanitarian access in the region. The meeting in Amman would also provide MPs and UN agencies with a unique opportunity for inter-parliamentary dialogue and for exchanging views on the situation, including that of refugees and displaced persons. This discussion will also allow for informed decisions, and would help identifying key messages to be delivered during the PAM mission in New York and Washington, as well as to the countries of the region.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the serious concern expressed by the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Lebanese National Assembly on the possibility of a spill over, on a large scale, of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon. In addition to the worrisome skirmishes already taking place in the North of the country, and the casualties being registered, a massive exodus of Syrians toward Beirut, in case of the battlefield being extended to the urban areas of Damascus, is considered as a nightmare for the stability of Lebanon and of the entire region.

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In conclusion PAM wishes to recall that out of the 21.4 million Syrian population, 6.8 million are in urgent need of assistance. There are in the country 4.3 million internally displaced and 1.8 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries.

Children represent 3.1 million of those in need of assistance and protection, and therefore PAM appeals to all Syrian parties to the conflict, and the international community, to act immediately for a political and peaceful solution.

Furthermore, PAM stresses the need to keep the humanitarian and political tracks separate, in order to facilitate access by the civilian population to aid and protection.

PAM will continue to work together with the Parliaments of Syria, of its member states and the UN and the EU to facilitate dialogue and to secure channels of communication and aid delivery to the Syrian civilians.

List of officials met in Syria and Lebanon

PAM Delegation

Amb. Sergio Piazzi, Secretary General
Mr. Mourad Youssry, Deputy Secretary General

The Syrian Arab Republic People's Assembly

H.E. Mr. Mohammed Jihad Al-Laham - Speaker of the People's Assembly of Syria

Hon. Khaled Al Aboud- Member of the Bureau

Hon. Abd Al Mu'ty Mashlab - Member of the Bureau

Hon. Dr. Fadia Deeb - Chairwoman of Arab and Foreign Affairs Committee

Hon. Fayez al Sayegh - Chairman of Press and Media Committee

Hon. Walid al Saleh - Chairman of Directing and Guidance Committee

Hon. Omar Ousi - Chairman of National Reconciliation Affairs Committee

The Syrian Government

H.E. Kinda Al Shammat - Minister of Social Affairs

H.E. Joseph Sweid - Minister of State for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Affairs

The Office of the UN/LAS Joint Special Representative for Syria

Mr. Elio Tamburi Quinteiro - Senior Political Affairs Officer

Mrs. Tamara Al-Zayyat - Political Affairs Officer

UN Agencies in Syria

Mr. Radhouane Nouicer - UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator in Syrian Arab Republic (UNHCR)

Mr. Raul Rosende - Head of Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the Syrian Arab Republic

Ms. Wafaa Elfadil Saeed - Deputy Head of OCHA in the Syrian Arab Republic

Mr. Niyazi Maharramov - Representative a.i., UNHCR

Mrs. Elizabeth Hoff - Representative a.i, World Health Organization

Mr. Ismail Kamil - Chief of Operations, UNICEF

Mrs. Laila Baker - Representative of the United Nations Populations Fund to Syria

Mr. Matthew Hollingworth - UN Deputy Regional Emergency Coordinator in Syria and Neighboring Countries, WFP

Ms. Sophie Etzol - Associate Protection Officer, UNHCR

The Diplomatic Representations in Syria

H.E. Azamat Kulmuhametov - Russian Ambassador to Syria

Monsignor Dr. Giorgio Chezza - Chargè d'Affaires, Apostolic Nunciature in Syria

The Lebanese National Assembly

Hon. Abdellatif Zein - Chairman of the Foreign Affairs and Emigrants Committee at the Lebanese National Assembly

Hon. Gen. Edgar Maaluf - Head of the Lebanese Parliamentary Delegation to PAM

