

Press Release

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Situation in Gaza: Congress Bureau calls for greater involvement of local authorities in peace efforts

Strasbourg, 20.01.2009 – The Bureau of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, meeting in Luxembourg on 20 January, adopted the following statement:

"The Bureau of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe welcomes the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip after weeks of fighting, and calls on all parties to the conflict to begin immediate negotiations for a lasting truce. The Bureau expresses its solidarity with the population in the Gaza Strip affected by the extreme military violence, which left more than a thousand people dead and thousands injured, causing unbearable suffering. It condemns the excessive use of force by the Israeli army and the blatant disregard for the civilian population caught in the fighting. It deplores furthermore the targeting of civilian and humanitarian infrastructures during the attacks. The Bureau also condemns the firing of rockets by Hamas into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip, which killed civilians and only fuelled the conflict.

The Bureau urges the Israeli authorities to help Palestinian local authorities to provide for the basic needs of their communities, and to that end, to ensure the effective delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid, allow unimpeded access to humanitarian assistance, and allow access for journalists to the conflict zones.

The Bureau reaffirms its conviction that the search for a long-term solution to the Middle East problem must begin with a durable ceasefire, negotiation and mutual recognition of two independent and sovereign states. It stresses the role of municipal networks and the importance of City Diplomacy for the Congress as a tool in conflict prevention, peace building and post-conflict reconstruction.

The Bureau appeals to the Union of Local Authorities in Israel (ULAI) and the Association of Palestinian Local Authorities (APLA), both enjoying observer status with the Congress, to commit themselves to undertaking efforts and initiatives and stepping up contacts and cooperation aimed at building an atmosphere which would allow for dialogue between their communities, and at strengthening local democracy necessary for the overall democratic development of the region. The Congress is prepared to facilitate such a dialogue. The Bureau calls on the Israeli and Palestinian authorities to encourage and facilitate such efforts and initiatives at local level, also within the Palestinian communities in order to achieve inter-Palestinian reconciliation, a major component in bringing about peace.

The Bureau calls for the broadest possible involvement of European cities and regions both in providing immediate humanitarian assistance to the communities suffering from the conflict, and in contributing to long-term efforts of local and regional authorities in favour of the peace process in the Middle East. It welcomes and supports the initiatives launched by several networks, and appeals to European local and regional authorities to join in these initiatives and their support programmes."

The Congress has two chambers, the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions.

It brings together 318 full and 318 substitute members representing more than 200 000 European territorial communities.

President of the Congress : Yavuz Milden (Turkey, EPP/CD), President of the Chamber of Regions: Ludmila Sfirloaga (Romania, SOC),

President of the Chamber of Local Authorities : Ian Micallef (Malta, EPP/CD).

Political Groups : Socialist Group (SOC), Group of the European People's Party – Christian Democrats (EPP/CD),

Independent and Liberal Democrat Group (ILDG).