Situation of women in armed conflicts and their role in the reconstruction and the democratic process in countries after a conflict

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Véronique **DE KEYSER** (PES, BE) by 315 votes for, 23 against and 67 abstentions. Members highlighed the positive role that women play in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. They also draw attention to the vulnerability and special needs of women and girls in conflict situations and women as perpetrator of violence. In general terms, the report stressed the need to mainstream a gender perspective into peace research, conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping operations, post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction and to ensure a gender component in field programmes.

Women as war victims: Parliament emphasisedthe importance of access to reproductive health services in conflict situations and refugee camps, both during and after conflicts. Such services include the need for women to have the possibility of giving birth in hospital without the prior authorisation of a male relative, or terminating unwanted pregnancies, and to have access to psychological help. All States have a responsibility to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for sexual violence against women and girls, such as rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, enforced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation and any other form of sexual violence of comparable seriousness. States must recognize and condemn these crimes as a crime against humanity and a war crime and in this regard. These crimes should be excluded from amnesty provisions. In addition, stopping the use of child soldiers in conflicts, including small girls, who are subjected to full-blown sexual slavery was a priority. Parliament urged that long-term psychological, social, educational and economic programmes be set up for these children. It condemned violence against women in all circumstances but called for zero tolerance of the sexual exploitation of children, girls and women in armed conflicts and refugee camps, and demanded severe administrative and criminal penalties for humanitarian staff, representatives of international institutions, peacekeeping forces and diplomats guilty of such exploitation.

Women as peacemakers: Parliament highlighted the positive role that women play in conflict resolution and in post-conflict reconstruction and in particular in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes. It supported all those recommendations which, since UNSCR 1325 (2000), have sought to improve the lot of women in conflicts, and called on the Council and Commission to incorporate and implement these recommendations, particularly those made in its resolution of 30 November 2000 into all their policies. However, despite all the resolutions, appeals and recommendations adopted and made by various international and European institutions, women are still not fully involved in conflict-prevention and conflict-resolution, peace-keeping operations and peace-building. It is not fresh recommendations that are called for, but the drawing-up of a practical action programme with the identification of the means necessary for its carrying-out, and assessment of the obstacles to and monitoring of the results of implementation. Parliament called for an annual report to be submitted to the European Parliament on the implementation of the programme. It went on to point out the persistence of discrimination against women with regard to access to capital and resources such as food and education, to information technologies and to health care and other social facilities. Women's involvement in economic activities is of crucial importance in order to support their socio-economic position in post-conflict societies.

Women and war: Parliament drewattention to the problem of female suicide bombers and stressed that rape used as a weapon of war affects all women, irrespective of ethnic, religious and ideological differences. Women who have been raped are socially stigmatised, excluded and even killed.

Parliament went on to make a series of recommendations. These include the following:

-greater participation by women in diplomacy and Member States' diplomatic services, and training women within those services in negotiation and mediation techniques, thus creating registers of women who are qualified for peace- and security-related posts;

-the concepts of transitional justice to be applied in peace processes and the transition to democracy and the rule of law, while respecting victims' rights, the dignity of female witnesses along with the participation of women in committees of inquiry set up for the purposes of reconciliation, and the incorporation of gender mainstreaming in the measures adopted by these committees;

-recommendations should be limited to what is essential, namely urging the institutions to seek synergies on the specific action to be taken with other international institutions pursuing the same objectives, and to make the best possible use of the new financial instruments of the 2007-2013 financial framework as incentives and means of leverage;

- that Parliament investigate the problem of suicide attacks by women, and launch a study of the issue culminating in a conference bringing together not only specialists but also other people with a knowledge of gender issues from the countries concerned and Islamic religious leaders;

-it is essential that the Commission retain the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights as a specific instrument within the 2007-2013 financial framework. The instrument has in the past ensured the success of calls for tender and budgetary headings specific to women's rights, without requiring the agreement of the governments in place;

Finally, Parliament supported the due implementation of human rights clauses in agreements with third countries and of the principles of international humanitarian law and related international agreements, with specific reference to women's rights and needs.