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Press release

Human rights: assassinations in Guinea-Bissau, armed conflicts in the Philippines, expulsion of NGOs from Sudan

The assassinations of President Joao Bernardo Vieira and Army Chief of Staff General Tagme Na Waie in Guinea-Bissau, the on-going political violence in the Philippines and the expulsion of ten international NGOs by President Al-Bashir of Sudan were the subjects of three resolutions on democracy and human rights adopted by the EP at the end of this week's Strasbourg session.

Crisis in Guinea-Bissau

Parliament strongly condemns the recent assassinations in Guinea-Bissau of President Joao Bernardo Vieira and army chief of staff, General Tagme Na Waie, and calls on the international community "to support peace-building efforts in the country."

On 2 March 2009, President Vieira was shot by "renegade soldiers" following a bomb attack which killed General Tagme Na Waie. Both figures had been the subject of several assassination attempts in recent months. The EP blames the assassination attempts on a combination of "decades of political instability", and "political tension stemming from old rivalries, ethnic divisions and instability in the military ranks, and the ever increasing presence of drug-trafficking interests in the country."

The attacks have not been seen as coup by the army, and as such, Guinea-Bissau has not been suspended from the African Union. The EP particularly welcomes "the army's pledge to respect Guinea-Bissau's constitution" and calls on the international community to monitor the situation and "to assist in preserving [Guinea Bissau's] constitutional order."

New presidential elections

Following the assassination of the President, the Speaker of the National Assembly, Raimundo Pereira, was sworn in as head of state for a limited time. The EP hopes that the "presidential elections will be held within 60 days, as stipulated in the constitution", and calls for member states and the international community to provide the necessary financial and technical support.

Drug trafficking, political instability and peace building

The EP is particularly concerned with the drug trafficking problem in Guinea-Bissau, as it "serves as a major drugs transit point between South America and Europe", and it presents a "serious threat to the political stability of the country". MEPs are increasingly worried that

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the drugs trade could undermine "the ability of the country to recover." They are calling on the UN agencies, with appropriate support from ECOWAS to "develop a regional plan of action" to address the challenge of drug trafficking within the West African region.

The EP calls on the various factions within the country to work together to "speed up security sector reform…public administration reform, [and] anti corruption measures".

The resolution concluded by calling on the Council and Commission to continue providing assistance and support in Guinea-Bissau through its ESDP mission, 'EU SSR Guinea-Bissau.'

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Action needed to tackle long-standing insurgency in Philippines

Two long running armed conflicts in the Philippines are the subject of great concern to the EP. The Parliament strongly believes that "the conflict can only be resolved through dialogue", and that the resolution of the insurgency "is essential for the sake of…development" in the Philippines.

Since 1969, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the government have been fighting in the south of the country, in what is one of Asia's longest running insurgencies. The second conflict, between the government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) has claimed thousands of lives, and violence has continued in spite of a ceasefire in 2003.

The EP calls on the Government of the Philippines to "urgently resume peace negotiations" with the MILF, in order to prevent the spread of further violence. Parliament also welcomes the November 2008 mediation talks between the government and the NDFP, and "calls on the parties to comply with their bilateral agreements." The EP praises the role of the Norwegian government in its efforts to encourage both sides to participate in formal talks.

Abductions, and murders of activists, lack of independence for the judiciary

Since 2001, hundreds of activists, trade unionists, journalists and religious leaders in the Philippines have been killed or abducted, and there is "ample evidence" that the security and armed forces have been involved; despite the governments claims to the contrary. The EP calls on the government to end the "systematic intimidation and harassment of political and human rights activists, members of civil society, journalists and witness in criminal prosecutions." MEPs also call for a through investigation into the high number of executions and forces disappearances, and for an independent monitoring mechanism to be established.

The EP is especially concerned with the lack of independence for the judiciary, as lawyers and judges are also subject to harassment and killings, which "makes it impossible to effectively investigate criminal offences and prosecute those who are responsible for them."

UN action and support for peace negotiations

The EP reiterates its request to the Philippine authorities to allow the UN human rights bodies to have unrestricted access to the country, and for the government to swiftly ratify international human rights instruments. MEPs request that the Council and Commission support the peace negotiations, including by means of facilitation, if requested. Parliament calls on the EU to provide financial assistance as necessary, but to ensure that it "is accompanied by scrutiny of possible violations of economic, social and cultural rights, with special attention being paid to encouraging dialogue and inclusion of all groups in society."

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President Al-Bashir expels 13 leading NGOs from Khartoum

In a resolution on Sudan, the EP "strongly condemns the expulsion of 13 humanitarian aid agencies from Khartoum in response to the international arrest warrant issued by the ICC *[International Criminal Court: editor's note]* against Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir on 4 March 2009".

Aid agencies in Darfur are running "the largest humanitarian operation in the world", and according to the UN, up to 4.7 million people are reliant on their services. The expulsion of the aid agencies could lead to increased mortality and morbidity, due to interrupted health services and an increase in outbreaks of infectious diseases.

The EP voices serious concern "at the immediate impact of the expulsions on the provision of the humanitarian aid that is vital to hundreds of thousands of people".

It demands that "the Government of Sudan immediately reverse its decision to expel the 13 aid agencies and allow them to continue their essential work in ensuring the survival of vulnerable populations in Darfur" and "calls on the Council and Commission to step up their efforts vis-à-vis the African Union, the Arab League and China to prevail upon the Sudanese Government to do so".

In a late amendment, the resolution calls for the immediate and unconditional release of three aid workers from Médecins sans Frontières Belgium who are being held hostage after being kidnapped in Darfur yesterday.

The Sudanese Government is also urged "to take positive steps to ensure that human rights defenders in Sudan are not persecuted if they speak favourably of the ICC decision and to refrain from any harassment or intimidation of human rights defenders".

However, MEPs voted to remove from the resolution certain paragraphs expressing full support for the ICC warrant and calling on the court to threaten further action. These changes were made - according to MEPs who spoke during the debate - on the pragmatic grounds that the current situation is sensitive and that the Sudanese president might be prevailed upon to go into exile if the ICC warrant were cancelled, thereby providing a solution to the situation.

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