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e-fa News Round-Up March 2010

News bulletin from the European Free Alliance Group

The European Free Alliance (EFA) draws together political parties fighting for democracy and self-determination for the stateless nations and regions of Europe. European Free Alliance MEPs sit in a joint European parliamentary group with the Greens, making up the fourth largest group in parliament.

EFA MEPs are:

Jill Evans MEP - Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales (EFA Group President)

Ian Hudghton MEP - Scottish National Party (Vice-President)

Frieda Brepoels MEP - Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (Vice-President)

François Alfonsi - U Partitu di a Nazione Corsa

Oriol Junqueras MEP - Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya

Alyn Smith MEP - Scottish National Party

Tatjana Zdanoka MEP - For Human Rights in a United Latvia

This week in Strasbourg: 8 - 11 March

- Vote on the Goldstone Report
- Better Protection for holidaymakers
- No to GMOs in Europe
- Traditional Fishing Rights
- Nuclear non-proliferation
- Xynthia

EFA MEPs have been in Strasbourg this week for a plenary session of the European Parliament. Subjects on the agenda included a vote on the Goldstone report concerning the Gaza conflict, measures to offer better protection to holidaymakers and a very visual demonstration of opposition to GMOs in the plenary chamber.

Vote on the Goldstone report

EFA MEPs welcomed the European Parliament's decision to support the findings of the Goldstone report into human rights violations during the Gaza conflict last year.

N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels spoke in the debate which was held last month and called on the EU to do more to promote respect for international law in the region. Speaking in the February debate in parliament, Frieda said: *"The Goldstone report has clearly shown that both Israel and Hamas were responsible for human rights violations during the Gaza war. The UN has on two occasions called upon both parties to carry out independent investigations; fourteen months on, that call is still left up in the air."*

SNP MEP Alyn Smith welcomed the outcome of the vote which was held this week. Alyn commented *"The Goldstone Report is a meticulous, well-researched, fair and accurate assessment of violations of human rights during the conflict by all parties."*

The Resolution on the Goldstone Report, which was adopted by the Parliament by 335 votes in favour with 287 against, accepts findings by a UNHCR Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza conflict headed by Richard Goldstone. The final report was released on 15 September 2009 and documents numerous violations of international human rights law during the conflict.

Better protection for holidaymakers

MEPs had a chance to debate the Commission's proposals to revise the 1990 Package Travel Directive which protects holidaymakers' rights when they book through a travel agency. The updated legislation is set to include compensation for passengers should airlines go bust.

N-VA MEP Frieda Brepoels, a substitute member of the EP Committee on Transport and Tourism spoke in the debate. Brepoels was critical of the Commission's failure to come up with better and more comprehensive revised legislation at an earlier date. She said that whilst more and more people now travel, fewer fall under the scope of the original legislation.

Brepoels called for the scope of the legislation to be widened and to include passengers rights to compensation. She also called for the role and definition of travel agents to be clarified in the revised directive and for the Commission to explain clearly passenger entitlements in the event of travel companies going bust.

Watch Frieda's intervention in the debate at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/wps-europarl-internet/frd/vod/player?language=en&menusearchfrom=bymep&pageby=unit&idmep=28463&discussionId=0&page=0&category=0&format=wmv?date=&askedDiscussionNumber=1>

No to GMOs in Europe

EFA MEPs took part in a symbolic protest in the chamber of the European Parliament in Strasbourg during question time with European Commission President José Manuel Barroso.

They joined Green colleagues in holding up posters with the slogan 'For a GMO-Free Europe'. MEPs are angry with the European Commission's decision to authorise a new strain of genetically modified potato.

The European Commission has issued the first new permission to grow a genetically-modified plant variety in 12 years. New EU Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner John Dalli gave the go-ahead to the "Amflora" potato variety which is produced by German pharmaceutical company BASF.

Plaid MEP Jill Evans said: *"Opinion polls show that over 70% of people are against GM food, so this decision by the European Commission has nothing to do with the interests of consumers. There are serious health and environmental concerns about this particular strain of potato. This is an untried and untested product and the European Commission has acted far too rashly. I have written to the Commissioner and strongly urged him to reconsider."*

See the protest at <http://greens-efa-service.org/medialib/mcinfo/pub/en/scc/1518>

Traditional Fishing Rights

SNP MEP Ian Hudghton welcomed support from various European governments for the principle of EU nations retaining historical fishing rights according to traditional practices. Germany, Denmark and Estonia have all backed the principle of "relative stability" whereby fishing opportunities are allocated according to historical catches.

The international support is in contrast to the position of both the UK government and the Tory Party who have in recent weeks called for the scrapping of historical rights.

Mr Hudghton commented: *"The SNP believes that powers over fisheries should be returned to Europe's fishing nations. Coastal communities around Europe have depended on their traditional fishing waters for generations - and those historical benefits must be retained. Fortunately the Scottish government are not alone in seeking to protect the principle of relative stability. Whilst both Labour and the Tories are preparing to sell Scotland's fishermen out once again, an alliance of northern nations is emerging intent on protecting their fishing heritage."*

Nuclear non-proliferation

EFA MEPs called for the EU to take a strong line against nuclear weapons ahead of the five yearly review conference of the Nuclear Non-proliferation treaty that will take place in New York in May. The European Parliament has called for nuclear free zones to be set up in certain regions, and for all tactical nuclear warheads to be removed from Europe as a step towards full nuclear disarmament.

EFA MEPs co-signed a letter to President Obama which has cross-party support. The letter reads:

Mr President,

We, the undersigned Members of the European Parliament, share your vision of a nuclear free world and wholeheartedly support your initiative to give nuclear disarmament new momentum. It is imperative that this

momentum is shared and sustained in order to make the upcoming NPT Review Conference a success and to build on the commitments made in 2000.

We believe that the elimination of all tactical nuclear weapons in Europe is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed by the US and Russia, following the successful completion of the treaty on strategic nuclear weapons. It is the sincere wish of the majority of people in Europe that tactical nuclear weapons are withdrawn from Europe and eliminated.

As a first step we call on you to withdraw the remaining US nuclear weapons from our territories.

This step would be an important confidence-building measure. It would also strengthen the NPT by addressing the disarmament obligation contained in Article VI that applies to all states. It would greatly underpin arguments for compliance to the non-proliferation articles in the treaty, by demonstrating that European countries do not see nuclear weapons as a addition to their security.

Xynthia

MEPs debated the aftermath of and response to 'Xynthia', the violent storm that claimed a number of lives and caused devastation across a large area of Southern Europe recently. They approved using the European Solidarity Fund to help member states cope with the catastrophe.

Corsican MEP François Alfonsi intervened and was critical of the member states for having permitted so much construction and development on coastlines and alongside rivers. He argued that they too should take their share of the responsibility.

Speaking in the debate Alfonsi said: *"If people have died or have lost everything in these disasters, it's not the elements alone that are to blame. It's also because very serious errors have been made in allowing such overdevelopment along coasts and rivers. These are errors of the member states, of their inadequate laws, of their lax administration and their governments who've shown little responsibility.*

"Allowing construction in areas prone to flooding is no less serious than encouraging the consumption of tobacco or the use of asbestos whilst people were dying as a result and we knew that quite well. Before Xynthia, there was Madeira, before that Sicily, tomorrow other areas will be at risk. If the European Parliament doesn't raise it's voice, then it will in turn have to accept it's share of the responsibility for future disasters. The EU has to show it's solidarity but it also has to show it's responsibility."

Watch François speak in plenary at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/wps-europarl-internet/frd/vod/player?language=en&menusearchfrom=bymep&pageby=unit&idmep=96750&discussionId=0&page=0&category=0&format=wmv?date=&askedDiscussionNumber=0>

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