

European Parliament endorses Goldstone Gaza report

Jewish leaders 'deeply disappointed' by endorsement, which passed with 335 votes in favor versus 287 against.

By The Associated Press and Cnaan Liphshiz

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The European Parliament on Wednesday urged its 27-member states to monitor the Israeli and Palestinian probes into alleged war crimes committed during last year's late-winter conflict in Gaza.

The resolution backed the findings of a UN-appointed expert panel chaired by South African Judge Richard Goldstone, which concluded that both sides committed war crimes and possible crimes against humanity during the war that began in December 2008 and ended in January 2009.

The parliamentary move, which would give the EU an unprecedented role in evaluating the progress of Israel's war crimes probe, was sharply criticized by Israel.

"We find this resolution flawed and counterproductive," said Yoel Mester, spokesman for Israeli mission to EU. "While other players are striving to support the peace process and to start the proximity talks between Israel and Palestinians, it is regrettable that the European Parliament chooses to concentrate on a highly controversial issue."

In December, the EU accused Israel of trying to divide the bloc to stop it from passing a resolution calling for Jerusalem to be the shared capital of Israel and for a future Palestinian state. The measure was adopted despite Israel's opposition.

The European Union also has criticized Israel over its suspected role in the slaying of a Hamas militant in Dubai and the killers' alleged use of forged EU passports.

The European Union's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton also recently asked to be allowed to visit the Gaza Strip, which remains under Hamas control.

The European Parliament measure, passed by 335-287, said Ashton should monitor actively the implementation of recommendations included in the Goldstone report.

In January, the UN General Assembly gave the two sides five more months to finalize their own investigations into war crimes allegations during the conflict, in which 13 Israelis and almost 1,400 Palestinians were killed.

On Monday, Israel's Foreign Ministry said it would allow Ashton and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon into Gaza. Israel has routinely banned foreign officials from crossing into Gaza since Hamas' violent takeover of the strip in 2007, maintaining that such visits bolster the Islamic militant group.

The European Parliament also said it was "concerned" about "pressure placed on NGOs involved in the document's preparation."

Jewish leaders said they were "deeply disappointed" and puzzled by the motion.

"Europe, which preaches to Israel and to the whole world about freedom of expression, is now calling to stifle criticism ensured by freedom of expression because it's directed at the Goldstone report," said Arie Zuckerman, a senior executive of the European Jewish Congress.

The European Parliament's resolution was a softened version of an earlier draft which called for implementing the Goldstone report. The draft was scrapped after European Jewish Congress Moshe Kantor warned party leaders that the resolution would damage EU-Israel relations.

The final resolution said EU member states should "demand the implementation of the Goldstone report's recommendations and accountability for all violations of international law."

Kantor told Haaretz last week that if the European Parliament adopts the Goldstone report, it will be the "strongest endorsement the document has received so far."

Zuckerman said the European Parliament "gave indirect endorsement to Hamas" by passing Wednesday's resolution on the Goldstone report, and added it "damaged the peace process with the Palestinians."

"The fact that over 45 percent of MEPs voted against the resolution is cause for some satisfaction," Kantor said. "The resolution passed by only a narrow margin, and not the consensus that was expected."

The European United Left-Nordic Green Left (EUL-NGL) - which has 25 MEPs - meanwhile, said it welcomed the European Parliament's resolution.

MEP Kyriacos Triantaphyllides from the group said: "For the first time, a resolution voted in the European Parliament acknowledges Israel's violations of international humanitarian law."

The party called "for the immediate adoption of its findings by EU Member States and the implementation of its recommendations," demanding, "that no upgrading of EU - Israel Association Agreement is conceded given the violations committed by Israel."

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