

Address by Minister D'Alema on developments in the Middle East in a hearing before Joint Commissions of the Senate of the Republic (3rd: Foreign Affairs, Emigration) and the Chamber of Deputies (III: Foreign and Community Affairs)

31 July 2006 - D'ALEMA, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Mr. President, today's hearing takes place the day after the Conference for Lebanon, a major international event in which our country played a leading role.

There is one fact that I do not believe needs pointing out: the Conference was held in Rome on the joint initiative of the United States and our country, thanks also to the Italian government's efforts over recent months to assert Italy's dynamic role in response to the tragic Middle East crisis.

This initiative must be considered not only for its importance per se and the results obtained, which I shall illustrate, but also as a political action and point in a process that I believe, strengthened also by the fact that the Conference was held in Rome, will allow us to proceed with greater credibility and impact.

An indication of the role that Italy intends to play is the fact, for example, that yesterday evening Palestinian President Abu Mazen asked to come to our country. I point this out since I will have to leave at 16.45 in order to meet with him. I personally consider this meeting, and subsequent ones (in the coming days I intend to make a trip to Israel), as parts of the same initiative. And it is for this reason that I would like the Conference to be considered a step forward. No one imagined convening a peace conference without the presence of the conflicting parties, the only ones capable of establishing peace or of calling a ceasefire. What did take place in Rome was the formation of a coalition that can and wants to act on behalf of peace.

I would like, first of all, to draw attention to this coalition and to the meeting's format: the list of attendees is, in my opinion, in initial important result. In truth this list was inherited from the previous government. The Lebanon Core Group met for the first time in September 2005, a group of countries engaged in supporting the reconstruction and democratic stabilisation of Lebanon. We limited ourselves to the creative use of one of the many existing international organisations, and one that could, at this moment, work on behalf of promoting rapid intervention in the crisis under way.

We agreed on an enlargement of the format with the Americans, for whom it was important to include Canada and Turkey, and which, as far as we were concerned, meant the presence of all the major European countries including Germany and Spain, who were originally excluded from the group. For their obvious direct geographic involvement in the crisis area, Cyprus and Greece were subsequently included.

The United States, Canada, the principal European countries and a substantial group of Arab and Islamic countries were able, therefore, to sit at the same table with the major international institutions. In this regard, it is necessary to gratefully acknowledge the personal presence, and not that of a special envoy, of the United Nations Secretary General, who certainly contributed to endowing this meeting with great import.

I am convinced that maintaining this collaboration will have to be a priority commitment over the coming months. It is obvious that, beyond the differences in viewpoint displayed in the

course of the meeting, to which I shall return later, only through close coordination between Europe (in its totality, not just the willing), the United States and a large portion of the Arab world - within the framework of the international institutions, and first and foremost the United Nations - can progress be made leading toward an end to the difficult situation into which this unilateral approach has placed that part of the world. Only in this political context will it be possible also to isolate fundamentalism and terrorism, which is a goal only attainable through the mobilisation of the greater portion of the Arab world.

This is the Italian government's political and diplomatic approach. To this end I would like to point out that, when speaking to the Chamber of Deputies immediately after the G8 meeting, I stressed the importance of combining forces with the United States, Europe and the so-called moderate Arab world, which was what we had in the format of this Conference.

One of the main goals that we set is that this event should not be the only one of its kind. I would like to inform the Parliament that, in the final, close-up conversations I had during the luncheon at the end of the Conference -always an integral and often more interesting part of these sorts of encounters - it was agreed with the UN Secretary General that the group would meet again in New York in September, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, in order to evaluate the initiative and results that, we hope, will have been achieved in the meantime.

Essentially, the objective is to make this group a driving force behind a work programme meant to continue over time. I believe that this is a clear sign of the progress being made through our diplomatic and international efforts regarding the risk of Italy eventually being emarginated. In particular, I was quite alarmed when a group of three European countries - two members of the Security Council and Germany - joined with the United States on an issue as crucial as the Iranian nuclear question, with the intention of excluding Italy. This is a problem of our country's political-diplomatic placement, but there is no doubt that we are highly interested in collaborating with the five major European countries, and obviously with the institutions. This is a format that appeals to us.

Participants in the Conference in Rome included the President of the European Council, the Commission and the High Representative for European Foreign Policy. In other words, all of Europe was there. The presence of the five main European countries alongside Union institutions means Europe. We are interested in this format being imposed with us included, along with all the leading players necessary. From this standpoint we have made some decisive advances, and it was a source of particular satisfaction to have insisted on Germany's being invited to Rome, hoping naturally that a similar and reciprocal attitude will prevail in the future.

What results were achieved? We had four goals. First of all, to reinforce and concretise a humanitarian effort, and secondly to establish an understanding, a willingness and political desire to create an international security force to be mobilised under the aegis of the United Nations and that can represent a change in the region. I would recall that Israel has never accepted the idea of the presence of an international security force in the region; the idea that Israel had to provide its own for its own security with the military means of which we are all aware, has always been a point of principle. The possibility that a substantial security force may be able to act in the region, with the predominant involvement of European countries is, in my judgement, a very important development giving Europe an importance that it has never before had in Middle East affairs. There were already signs of this with Europe's involvement

in the Rafah Crossing, but what could develop in the next few months is something much more substantial.

The other two goals were to involve the international community in the prospect of a financial effort aimed at the reconstruction and stabilisation of Lebanon, and to discuss the conditions of a ceasefire. As you know, it has been on this latter point that the clearest differences of opinion have been seen. It is obvious that this is an essential requirement. I believe that it was not possible to imagine the possibility of change in this regard since - I repeat - the necessary actors were missing; nevertheless, there is no doubt that some advances have been made also on this front, at least on the level of commitments undertaken, in particular in view of the commitments outlined at the St. Petersburg G8.

The humanitarian emergency has assumed dramatic proportions, as Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora stressed with great intensity and dramatic strength in his appeal to the international community. There are approximately 800,000 people now directly or indirectly affected by this humanitarian emergency. Italy was one of the first countries to lend humanitarian assistance to the Lebanese population, in addition to having very effectively conducted the evacuation of Italian nations and the citizens of other countries - indeed, we took anyone who showed up. In these operations, as always, we gave proof of the efficiency of our institutional facilities, facilities of the highest quality, regarded by other countries with great admiration. I am referring to the Crisis Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Civil Defence Department, collaborating with other non-governmental organisations, the presence of two Italian ships in the port of Beirut and many other means, which launched the first solidarity initiatives.

Our bilateral commitment was confirmed and reinforced at the Conference table, along with that of the main bilateral donors - United States, European countries and Saudi Arabia - and of the international organisations. It is clear that effective aid must be distributed in a timely and coordinated manner, in close coordination with the Lebanese government. It was also decided in the course of the Conference, that the UN, the EU and the US would work as a team.

At the same time the Conference once again asked the Israeli government to exercise the highest degree of moderation. I must add, in all sincerity, that these appeals for moderation have, unfortunately, not been concretely heeded thus far; suffice it to consider the bombardment that cost the lives of four UN observers or the very high number of civilians killed in Gaza yesterday. For this reason it is essential that the entire international community continue to insist that the number of innocent victims not be allowed to rise. The Israeli government has, in any case, decided to open a humanitarian corridor in order to allow for the distribution of aid; on her visit Tuesday to Jerusalem, Condoleezza Rice discussed the opening of the Beirut airport to humanitarian flights, which, as you have seen, subsequently commenced between Jordan and Lebanon. Great group pressure is being brought to bear in this regard, which is confirmed by the final declaration of the Rome Conference's two Presidents. Clearly this is not enough, but it is important.

In my opening address to the Conference I clearly called for a truce for humanitarian reasons, i.e. a suspension in hostilities, consisting of a gradual widening of humanitarian corridors and protected areas, especially those in the North of the country. Our position is clear. As demonstrated by the discussions in Rome, it is difficult to establish the conditions for a lasting ceasefire immediately, but some form of truce, of a suspension of hostilities, can and must be achieved, at least in the vast areas of Lebanon, so as to facilitate civilian rescue operations and

allow time for the definition of the terms of a sustainable ceasefire. I will attempt to push this point and, in order to further discuss these issues, will be in Jerusalem next Sunday to meet with the Israeli authorities. This topic will subsequently be on the agenda of the meeting of EU foreign ministers scheduled for next Tuesday in Brussels. As concerns the international force, the Conference made a concrete step forward as compared with the initial formulations of the G8. First of all, substantial political consensus, expanded to include moderate Arab countries, exists on the need to deploy a credible security force capable of cooperating with the Lebanese government and army on the implementation of UN resolution 1559. The force's mandate and composition is to be discussed by the UN Security Council. The Conference urged the Security Council to meet as soon as possible and I know that a ministerial meeting has already been planned for the coming days among Member States of the Security Council in order to commence discussions on the possibility of a meeting of the Council itself in the near future.

As I confirmed in my opening address to the Conference, Italy has already expressed, through President Prodi, its willingness to contribute concretely to an international force. This would be a force under UN mandate, to be deployed once a ceasefire is called, in accordance with the request of the Lebanese government; a force that will have to be effective in order to carry out its mandate, which will be to assist the Lebanese authorities in implementing UN resolutions 1559 and 1680. It is clear that we are not imagining a fighting force, but a security force that can be installed on the basis of an agreement between the two parties concerned. Nevertheless, it is clear that, as it will be located in a conflict area, it must be a credible one: this is not an observers' mission, but a substantial security force, which will have to involve many countries in a significant way.

It was also decided to convene a donors' conference in the future, whose task it will be to reconstruct the civil infrastructure of Lebanon, as well as to contribute to strengthening its institutions. Participants in the Rome table also committed to collaborating on reinforcing the Lebanese army, which will have to regain control over Southern Lebanon. The Conference expressed its strong and solid support for the principle of a sovereign, democratic and independent Lebanon. Differences remain over the terms of the ceasefire, the urgency of which was unanimously acknowledged.

Our position is that the international force must include a major European participation. In an interview President Chirac gave to "Le Monde", and carried by Italian daily newspaper "La Stampa", France's interest and willingness are clear, as is that of other European countries.

A portion - and I would say the vast majority of participants - called for the immediate cessation of hostilities in the conviction that this can be followed by a lasting ceasefire. This is my position as well. For some participants, on the other hand, the conditions for ceasefire are to be negotiated and established in order to make it possible that a suspension of hostilities does not simply mark a return to the status quo ante and, therefore, a prelude to a revived conflict. Let there be no mistake, everyone is concerned with creating a new situation that ensures Israel's security and prevents the risk of terrorist attacks on Israeli soil, with consequent military reprisals by Israel. It is, therefore, clear that no one wants to return to the situation as it was before. The problem is whether this change of situation can be achieved exclusively by the use of weapons, for how long, and with what consequences, or if, at a certain point - a point I hope we are nearing - the suspension of hostilities could make room for negotiations, put distance between fighting forces and allow for an agreement to install an international force in the regions. Naturally, yesterday in Rome it was not possible to make a

decision of this sort, which, I repeat, has to involve all the parties concerned, all of which were not present.

There is no doubt, however, that when we wrote of the pressing need to work toward an immediate ceasefire, we took on a commitment that, I believe, assumes an urgency that the international community has not displayed until today. Italy and Europe will certainly make a common effort with regard to the problem of the truce and the definition both of increased stability in relations with the government of Israel and with regard to a necessary regional approach. Indeed, the joint declaration at the conclusion of the Conference clearly stated that no progress is possible without a regional solution.

As I maintained in my opening to the Conference, a common commitment regarding Lebanon must be accompanied by a parallel, and equally important, commitment on the Palestinian-Israeli front, where, among other things, a tragic humanitarian emergency is under way in Gaza. Suffice it to read the interview in "Il Riformista" with Mustafa Barghouti, a representative of that fragile Palestinian civil society who certainly advocates neither fundamentalism nor terrorism, bearing dramatic witness to the situation in Gaza. To this end also I would recall that Italy is directly engaged from the humanitarian point of view, particularly in the healthcare sector, where concrete efforts are already under way or have already partly been made. Abu Mazen will be here today - I believe he has already arrived - to meet with President Prodi; I am scheduled to meet with him later in order to examine the situation together, along with the possibility of an Italian and European effort in support of the Palestinian National Authority. A regional approach also means the involvement of the largest number possible of regional actors and their assumption of responsibility. Present in Rome were Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are part of that Arab Sunni world that views the actions of Hezbollah as a serious threat to regional stability and their own internal security. These countries are our natural partners in efforts at regional stabilisation.

A very complex issue, but one which must, nevertheless, be tackled, is the involvement of Syria and Iran in efforts to stabilise and pacify the region. Syria and Iran did not participate in the Conference in Rome. Inviting Syria to a conference on the stability of Lebanon would not have been advisable, in any case; when this was done in 2005, it was an extremely daring undertaking. The same is true for Israel with regard to certain aspects: these are two countries that, for historical reasons, have enormous difficulty in sharing this sort of effort.

Nevertheless it is quite clear that in order to arrest this negative spiral it is necessary to involve these countries, to invite them to participate in the search for a solution, instead of being part of the problem. We intend to work also toward this and, in truth, as you know we have already launched a dialogue at least with Iran; Iranian foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki, and presidential security advisor and head negotiator with European countries on the nuclear question Ali Lariani, have both visited our country

We are, therefore, in the midst of a highly complex and dramatic situation. I share the sentiments of public opinion, which measures the political and diplomatic efforts that have been made to date as insufficient in light of the violence of the conflict and the images of war. Nevertheless, I am obliged to stress that these efforts exist, that the goals we are proposing are ambitious, even though thus far only a few small steps have been taken. I am equally convinced that the most ambitious goal that must be set is one that goes well beyond a ceasefire, beyond a fragile truce. In the end, there have been many ceasefires in the lengthy history of the Middle East conflict, along with the illusion of many a military solution.

Lebanese Prime Minister Siniora recalled that Israel has invaded Lebanon seven times with the idea of freeing itself from a threat, and that each time it has found itself with a bigger threat looming at its borders. There is no military solution to this infinite conflict: there can only be a political solution, which it is necessary to construct patiently and in respect of the needs of the populations involved.

Just as we acknowledge the suffering of the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples, we cannot but recognise that in recent days that Israel has taken harder blows than it has suffered in a long time, with the bombardment of a part of the country, of one of its major cities - Haifa. Israeli public opinion has certainly perceived a threat to the very existence of the State of Israel. Never before has balance been more necessary: it is necessary to demonstrate Italy's capacity to be equally close to the suffering and the legitimate aspirations of the peoples of that region, playing the role of a major European Mediterranean country that - within the given conditions and realistically pacing itself according to international relations - seeks to carry forward new processes of peace and lowered tensions in order to build a new scenario for that tormented part of the world.