Thursday 17 April 2014

P7_TA(2014)0461

Syria: situation of certain vulnerable communities

European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2014 on Syria: situation in certain vulnerable communities (2014/2695(RSP))

(2017/C 443/16)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to its previous resolutions on Syria, in particular that of 6 February 2014 on the situation in Syria ([1]),

— having regard to the Council conclusions on Syria of 14 April 2014 and 20 January 2014,

— having regard to the statements of Vice-President / High Representative Catherine Ashton of 15 March 2014 on the 3rd anniversary of the Syrian uprising, and of 8 April 2014 in reference to the killing of Father Van der Lugt, SJ, in Homs, Syria,

— having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,

— having regard to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the additional protocols thereto,

— having regard to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966,

— having regard to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief of 1981,

— having regard to UN Security Council resolution 2139 of 22 February 2014,

— having regard to the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic of 12 February 2014,

— having regard to the statement of the spokesperson for UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Syria of 7 April 2014,

— having regard to the statement of UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos on Syria of 28 March 2014,

— having regard to the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union of 2000,

— having regard to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,

— having regard to Rules 122(5) and 110(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the ongoing violent crisis in Syria has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe of a scale unprecedented in recent history, with more than 150 000 people, most of them civilians, killed, more than 6,5 million people internally displaced, and more than 2,6 million Syrian refugees, mainly in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt; whereas ethnic and religious minorities find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation in this crisis;

B. whereas the Syrian population has traditionally been composed of a rich diversity of ethnic and religious communities, respectively including Arabs, Arameans, Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, Kurds and Turkmens, and Muslims, Christians and Druze, as well as other groups; whereas none of the religious or ethnic communities in Syria has been spared by the three-year old conflict, which is increasingly taking on a sectarian dimension;

C. whereas these communities have always been part of Syrian society, contributing to its development and advancement inter alia through their engagement in the education, health, and culture sectors; whereas they therefore have an important role to play in the democratisation of Syria and need to be represented in any consultation on the country's future and in any reconciliation process;

([1]) Texts adopted, P7_TA(2014)0099.

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D. whereas until recently most of these communities had tried to avoid taking sides in the conflict, as many may recognise the need for a change of regime in Syria but also fear that, if the government is overthrown, they will be targeted by Sunni jihadist rebels, calling for the establishment of an Islamic state, or others;

E. whereas the Assad regime has deliberately triggered a dynamic of sectarian polarisation as its survival strategy, which has inflamed the latent and hitherto largely repressed communal tensions; whereas the increasing presence and infiltration of Islamist extremists and jihadists on all sides in the conflict has created legitimate concerns among minority communities in the country; whereas the deepening Sunni-Shiite cleavage in Syria is also affecting inter-communal relations in neighbouring countries;

F. whereas Dutch Jesuit Father Frans van der Lugt, who had been living in Syria for many decades and was well known for refusing to leave the besieged city of Homs, was beaten and shot dead by gunmen on 7 April 2014; whereas the UN Secretary-General has condemned this inhumane act of violence against a man who stood by the people of Syria amid sieges and growing difficulties; whereas other Christians remain in the monastery where Father van der Lugt was killed and the international community is worried about their safety, as it is worried about the safety of the many civilians still trapped in the city of Homs, which continues to be under siege;

G. whereas Father Paolo Dall'Oglio has been missing since July 2013, and Bishop Boulos Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Bishop John Ibrahim of the Assyrian Orthodox Church were seized in April 2013 from their car by gunmen outside the northern city of Aleppo; whereas their fate is still unknown;

H. whereas the fights between regime forces and rebel fighters, including elements linked to Al-Qaeda, at the end of March 2014 led to the evacuation of the vast majority of the population of Kassab, an Armenian town on the Syrian-Turkish border; whereas there are contradicting reports about the number of victims of these events;

I. whereas the latest reports from Syria show that rebels from the Al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front have captured a number of Christian and Kurdish villages on the Turkish border, such as the Kurdish town of Ayn-Al-Arab/Kobane;

J. whereas Palestine refugees remain a particularly vulnerable group in the crisis in Syria; whereas many of them live in besieged areas, in particular in Yarmouk Camp, which continues to be under heavy attack by regime forces and various armed groups, leading to inhuman suffering of the 18 000 Palestinians staying in this area; whereas almost all of the 540 000 Palestine refugees in Syria are in need of assistance today, with more than half of them being internally displaced within the country, and are facing major obstacles or increasing restrictions when trying to flee to Egypt, Jordan or Lebanon;

K. whereas women and children continue to suffer from aggression, sexual and gender-based violence, abuse and the lack of basic goods and services in the ongoing crisis in Syria; whereas there are a disproportionately high number of women and children among Syrian refugees; whereas nearly 3 million children have dropped out of school in Syria since 2011, while at least 500 000 registered child refugees are not enrolled in schools in neighbouring countries;

L. whereas human rights defenders, intellectuals, religious figures, journalists and civil society activists continue to be victims of the violent crisis in Syria; whereas 2011 Sakharov Prize winner Razan Zaitouneh, who was kidnapped together with her husband and two other human rights activists more than four months ago in Douma, continues to be held at an unknown location;

M. whereas political and religious leaders have a duty at all levels to combat extremism and terrorism and to promote mutual respect among individuals and religious and ethnic groups;

N. whereas international humanitarian and human rights law prohibits the targeting of individuals or groups based on religious or ethnic identity, as well as attacks against civilians not taking part in hostilities; whereas such actions may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity; whereas UN Security Council resolution 2139 stressed the need to end impunity for violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of human rights, and reaffirmed that those who had committed or were otherwise responsible for such violations and abuses in Syria must be brought to justice;

1. Expresses its profound dismay at the unprecedented level of human suffering and loss of life, and expresses its solidarity with the families of all innocent victims in the Syrian conflict; strongly condemns the violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Assad regime and by pro-government militia; condemns any human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by armed groups opposing the regime; strongly condemns the increasing number of terrorist attacks carried out by extremist organisations and individuals in the country;

2. Is convinced that a lasting solution to the current crisis in Syria can only be achieved through a Syrian-led, inclusive political process with the backing of the international community; deplores the fact that peace talks are currently failing due to the regime's obstruction of these talks, and urgently requests that all the parties involved and the international community put all their efforts into working towards new talks, which will bring this massacre to an end; stresses the importance of the participation and contribution of all parts of Syrian society, including ethnic and religious minorities, in this process, and underlines the crucial role of minorities in preserving the unique cultural heritage and the tradition of intercultural, interethnic and interreligious coexistence in Syria, with the aim of creating a vibrant society for future generations of Syrians;

3. Reiterates that the rights of minorities are inextricably linked to respect for other fundamental human rights and freedoms, such as the right to liberty, security, equality and freedom of expression;

4. Strongly condemns the recent attacks against certain religious and ethnic communities in Syria, notably the Christians, Armenians and Kurds, and calls on all the parties involved to stop all actions aimed at inciting interethnic and interconfessional conflict; stresses that all actors involved in the conflict have a duty to protect all the different minorities present in the country; recognises, however, that the attacks against certain vulnerable communities are only one aspect of the Syrian civil war;

5. Condemns in the strongest possible terms the killing of Father Frans Van der Lugt, an inhumane act of violence against a man who stood by the people of Syria amid sieges and growing difficulties; pays tribute to his work, which extended beyond the besieged city of Homs and continues to help hundreds of civilians with their everyday survival needs;

6. Urges all parties to the conflict to adhere strictly to international humanitarian and human rights law, and calls for the protection of all vulnerable communities, inter alia by allowing humanitarian access and lifting all sieges of populated areas, including the Old City of Homs; reiterates its call for the establishment of safe havens along the Turkish-Syrian border, and possibly within Syria, and for the creation of humanitarian corridors by the international community;

7. Condemns the attack against the Armenian town of Kassab; supports all efforts at local level to avoid and combat sectarian violence in rebel-held areas and in Kurdish-majority areas; urges current and future Syrian authorities to provide reliable and efficient protection for vulnerable communities in the country and to ensure their safe and secure return to their homes, as well as ensuring that the perpetrators of the attacks against them are brought to justice and tried by due process;

8. Calls again for special attention to be given to the vulnerable situation of Palestine refugees in Syria, and particularly the inhuman living conditions of Palestinians staying in Yarmouk Camp; reiterates its call to all the parties involved in the conflict to allow the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and other international aid organisations unhindered access to this camp, as well as to all other besieged areas in the country, in order to alleviate the extreme suffering of the local population; commends the work of UNRWA in Syria and calls for increased international support for its activities;

9. Calls on the international community and the EU to pay special attention to the suffering and needs of women and children in the Syrian crisis; calls for zero tolerance regarding the killing, abduction and recruitment of children in particular, as well as for humanitarian aid capacities in the field of support to traumatised victims to be strengthened;

10. Recalls the pressing need to release all political detainees, civil society activists, humanitarian aid workers, religious figures (including Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, Greek Orthodox Bishop Boulos Yazigi and Assyrian Orthodox Bishop John Ibrahim), journalists and photographers held by the regime or by rebel fighters, and to grant independent monitors access to all places of detention; urges once again the EU and its Member States to make all possible efforts to achieve the release of 2011 Sakharov Prize winner Razan Zaitouneh and of all other human rights activists in Syria, including internet activist Bassel Safadi Khartabil;

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11. Remains convinced that there can be no sustainable peace in Syria without accountability for the crimes committed during the conflict, including for those based on religious or ethnic grounds; reiterates its call for the referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court and supports all initiatives in this direction; commends the work of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and of other international actors collecting and preserving a large volume of testimony on serious crimes committed by the regime and by some rebel groups in Syria, and calls for action in order to bring perpetrators to justice;

12. Expresses its grave concern at the profound consequences of the fragmentation of Syria for the stability and security of the region, particularly in Lebanon and Iraq; is deeply concerned about the high number of Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries, especially in Lebanon, where, according to the UNHCR, the number has now passed the 1 million mark, not including the tens of thousands who have not registered with the agency, while 12 000 people are fleeing Syria for Lebanon each week; is deeply concerned also about the continued refugee outflow affecting Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt; encourages the European Union and its Member States to continue providing substantial humanitarian assistance to the populations affected by the Syrian conflict;

13. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Vice-President / High Representative, the Council, the Commission, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, the Government and Parliament of Egypt, the Government and Parliament of Iraq, the Government and Parliament of Jordan, the Government and Parliament of Lebanon, the Government and Parliament of Turkey, the Secretary-General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, and all the parties involved in the conflict in Syria.