

## **Presentation of Ms. Ana Maria Gomes to the Kerkuk conference in the European parliament**

- I visited the northern region of Iraq, the Kurdish region, in February, after having visited Baghdad and the South of Iraq in January;
- In my second visit I went to Erbil, Suleymanyah and Halabja;
- I was very much impressed by the pragmatism of the KRG leadership and I am sure that the Kirkuk dispute will be solved the same way the dispute about the budget, the Iraqi flag, deBaathification, or even oil revenues have been - or are about to be - solved: peacefully, democratically, based on the Iraqi Constitution and International Law and on principles that serve the interests of all Iraqis;
- The Kurds have been the victims of some of the most brutal crimes of the 20th century, such as the horrors of the Anfal campaign and Halabja; they were massively displaced from their lands, including in and around Kirkuk; I know that Turkmens and Christians also suffered from this policy [of Arabization];
- Whether we like it or not the Iraqi Constitution is clear about the need for a referendum that will decide the future of Kirkuk during 2007: any solution has to take this into account; you cannot pick and choose what you like about Constitutions;
- It is also true that the tensions around Kirkuk are very great and that sometimes an election can exacerbate the problem it is supposed to solve; avoiding violence and a clash between different groups should of course be one of the most important criteria in taking any decisions about a referendum in Kirkuk;
- A lot of pragmatism and wisdom is therefore expected from local and regional leaders;
- And it was precisely this pragmatism that was shown by the Kurdish Regional Government when they stopped insisting on holding a referendum during 2007;
- It was also pragmatism that led the KRG and the Iraqi government to accept a greater role for the UN Mission in Iraq in solving disputed internal boundaries: the first recommendations about four disputed areas have been sent to President Talabani; soon, UNAMI will produce recommendations about Tal Afar, Tilkaif, Shekhan, Sinjar and Khanaqin; and when this process is complete, they will move to the toughest nut to crack: Kirkuk;
- I urge all the parts in this dispute to accept the UN recommendations and to avoid any provocative acts or destabilizing initiatives that might endanger this sensitive process;
- The latest news I receive are very encouraging; a possible breakthrough seems to be close: in the first week of June, we heard a top Kurdish official explicitly saying that the Kurds are ready to substantially change their position; let me quote what Nechirvan Barzani, prime minister of the KRG said: "In Kirkuk, as Kurds, we are ready for power-sharing. We are pushing for a solution, not especially a referendum. We have asked the UN to be technically involved because the situation is complicated."
- After allowing for the deadline for a referendum to be extended from December 2007 for six months, these statements by the KRG indicate a new willingness to compromise, which should be taken up by other groups;
- To these good news should be added recent developments in Kurdish-Turkish relations, with rumours of a possible visit of President Barzani to Ankara; I can only welcome this easing of tensions and I am sure a détente of the relations between Erbil and Ankara will not be irrelevant to solving the Kirkuk dispute peacefully...
- Finally, let me say that when I visited the parliament in Erbil, I also met some Turkmen representatives; they seemed to be well integrated into the political process there; they saw the inclusion of Kirkuk into the Kurdish Region as an advantage, as it would increase the Turkmen

population and, therefore, their electoral base; I conclude that the debates about the future of Kirkuk don't just happen between communities - they are also going on within all the communities, Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen;

- The most important principle that needs to guide these debates is that Iraq is now equipped with the institutional and legal tools to solve these disputes peacefully and patiently;
- The dictatorship is gone - whatever disputes divide you know, they are relatively small compared to the ethnic cleansing, massive humanitarian catastrophes and violations of human rights that happened under Saddam; it is now for the peoples of Iraq to learn how to enjoy the fruits of freedom and peace.