



– Press Release –

European Parliament hears of Human Rights Violations and a Crisis in Kerkuk Iraq's Turkmen Speak of ongoing Marginalisation

Conference organised by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and Iraqi Turkmen Human Rights Research Foundation (SOITM), in partnership with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Non-Violent Radical Party

Brussels, 26 – 27 March 2007: As the people of Europe celebrate fifty years of constructive political partnership, the European Parliament in Brussels has hosted a conference aiming to begin a dialogue hoping to secure a similar future for the people of Iraq.

The Turkmen are Iraq's third largest ethnic community, with a long history in its northern region. Their existence has however been characterised by a sustained catalogue of human rights violations and ongoing political marginalisation. This has most recently prompted a crisis in the oil rich city of Kerkuk, now **threatening to become a new theatre for conflict and confrontation**. With 31 December 2007 looming as the Iraqi constitution's deadline for resolving the city's future status, Kerkuk's historical Turkmen communities claim their lack of meaningful representation in local administration and large demographic changes following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime have unjustly favoured dominant Kurdish actors in a proposed referendum. A prerequisite for any legitimate resolution to the conflict, they claim, is the genuine inclusion of all affected communities and an end to ongoing human rights violations as rival factions jostle for influence and control.

Remarkably, this conference marked the first opportunity for Iraqi Turkmen representatives to present their experiences and opinions to the international community. Assembled press, Parliamentarians, European leaders, and civil society activists, were consequently given a new and previously unheard perspective on the realities of life in northern Iraq. **Mr. Ali Mehdi**, Head of the Turkmen Group at the Kerkuk City Council; **Ms. Nermin al-Mufti**, author and al-Ahram Correspondent; **Dr. Hassan Aydinli**, Iraqi Turkmen Front Representative, **Mr. Ersed Hurmuzlu**, author, and **Mr. Suphi Saatci**, Editor of Qardashlik Journal, spoke with great passion and conviction of the rich and diverse cultural history of both Iraq and the Turkmen people, emphasising **the historical precedent there is for a harmonious and unitary Iraqi state** in which all its communities live side by side. Where a genuine democratic process favours a federal over a unitary Iraq however, **Dr. Muzaffer Arslan**, advisor on Turkmen Affairs to the President of Iraq H.E. Jalal Talabani, confirmed his intention to respect this, underlining however that such a solution must acknowledge also Turkmen rights to a territory and distinct place within any federation.

Mr. Marco Cappato MEP and **Mr. J.M. Wiersma MEP** both stressed the need for creativity and a common commitment to stability when it comes to addressing the thorny issue of Kerkuk. Both Assyrian and Turkmen representatives present underlined their opposition to the imminent referendum, anxious that the ongoing process of "normalization" has failed to restore the historical demographic balance of the city following the manipulation of Saddam Hussein's regime, and concerned by what they consider a new period of Kurdish migration. They emphasised however also their willingness to respond to calls for creativity, discussing the possibility of Kerkuk being administrated jointly by all its communities as a region of its own. **Mr. Burhan Jaf**, EU Representative of the Kurdish Regional Government, supported proposals voiced by UNPO and assembled MEPs for stronger EU involvement with respect to election monitoring and other initiatives.

In particular, conference organizers UNPO General Secretary **Mr. Marino Busdachin** and SOITM Chairman **Sheth Jerjis**, echoed by other participating stakeholders, urged an EU-appointed commission to continue the discussions started at this conference, aiming to securing a sustainable solution and preventing further conflict and confrontation – a goal, it was acknowledged, which can only be achieved through the genuine inclusion of all Iraq's non-ruling communities.