

Hearing at the European Parliament, 6 October 2010, 9:00 – 11:00 -Zimbabwe: Women's Voices-

Zimbabwe's women raise their voice

The participation of women in the democratic transition process of Zimbabwe has been at the centre of a Parliamentary hearing that took place on the 6th of October in the European Parliament, Brussels. Speakers at this meeting, hosted by the European Greens member Judith Sargentini, were the honourable Sekai Holland, Co-Minister of the National Healing and Reconciliation Committee, Senator Sabine de Bethune from the Belgian Federal Parliament, Katariina Leinonen from the Council of the European Union, Zimbabwean journalist Grace Kwinjeh as well as Betty Makoni, founder and Director of Girl Child Network Zimbabwe (GCN) and Chief Executive Officer of Girl Child Network World Wide.

Having set the meeting in the context of the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, as well as the 30th anniversary of Zimbabwe's independence, the main issue at stake was where the voices of women have been heard in the process of transition. For the first time in Zimbabwe's history, a Global Political Agreement (GPA) was signed by three political parties, recognising universal rights and duties, for men just as for women.

"If we really want to build up a long lasting and stable reconciliation and peace building infrastructure we have to bring people who are fighting together...only a grass-roots based inclusive approach that reaches all regions will enable the creation of a national platform of peace" Minister Holland stated in her introductory speech. Accordingly, an action plan for UNSCR 1325 should be drafted and implemented by the current Government of National Unity (GNU) as to ensure a global partnership.

In the course of the meeting, Grace Kwinjeh launched her paper *'Thirty years after political independence: Creating political space for Zimbabwean women'*. "The cries of Zimbabwean women are still very loud" Kwinjeh pointed out. "History is repeating itself in a cynical way...women of the first generation that have been fighting for their voices to be heard are still fighting". In Kwinjeh's view, the launch of the Global Political Agreement by the government has been a milestone in Zimbabwe's transition towards democracy. Nonetheless, the way the debate "has been framed by the different players (political parties and civil society) lacks an adequately gendered perspective". Accordingly, democracy may be only achieved if women are actively included in the transitional process and if an equal partnership with men is ensured.

Speaking on behalf of the Belgian Federal Parliament, Sabine de Bethune pointed out the priority of UNSCR 1325 by the Belgian Presidency. Accordingly, until the end of the year, the EU may present indicators that have been created to assess and control the mechanisms at stake. Although the resolution has marked an important milestone, as the role of women in the resolution of conflicts has been included, "there exists a gap in the implementation process". According to de Bethune, the European Union did not manage to set up the right mechanisms in order to apply the legal text of the UN resolution. The achievements so far, bear no relation to the many reports and assessment papers that have been launched in recent years. "The 10th anniversary can [thus] give us a new boost" de Bethune concluded.

In order to strengthen the political dialogue between the EU and Zimbabwe's people, Katariina Leinonen from the Council of the European Union emphasised the Council's aim to bring EU officials together with local people, in order to promote discussion. Leinonen stated that the EU was very ambitious in its approach to guidelines for the UNSCR 1325 10th anniversary which will be celebrated at the end of October in New York.

Finally, Betty Makoni, founder and Director of Girl Child Network Zimbabwe (GCN) and who also received the prestigious CNN Hero 2009 award, urged the Zimbabwean organ of political healing and reconciliation to address the issue of sexual violence against girls in times of political violence. “Girls are the silent victims... the organ must address the needs of girls” Makoni stressed. Moreover, she added, boys that raped girls should be held accountable in front of such an organ. “We want young men to tell the truth...they have to recognise the trauma they perpetrated to others”. In order to strengthen the reconciliation process, families of both parties should meet in public clubs as to address the problems they have lived through.

At the end of October, a stakeholder meeting will take place in New York, during the 10th anniversary of the UNSCR 1325. The focus will be on the discussion of an action plan on UNSCR 1325 for Zimbabwe with the inclusion of civil society.