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Flemish members of parliament visit Gaza strip

by *Derek Blyth*,

SUMMARY

Unlike many others who have requested entry, several Flemish members of parliament were this week allowed to visit Palestine, where attacks last year devastated the region

Unique opportunity

A delegation of seven Flemish MPs visited the Gaza strip on a fact-finding mission this week. The delegation was made up of five Flemish MPs from the federal parliament and three from the Flemish parliament, representing all Flanders' political parties, apart from the far-right Vlaams Belang.



The Gaza visit formed part of a five-day mission organised by the Flemish development aid charities 11.11.11 and Broederlijk Delen. The MPs were taken to see the devastation caused last summer by the Israeli offensive in Gaza that killed more than 2,000 Palestinian civilians.

“No matter where you looked, you saw destruction,” said federal MP Wouter De Vriendt of Groen. “It was extremely confronting,” added Flemish MP Piet De Bruyn of N-VA.

Some 100,000 people are still homeless, according to Bogdan Vanden Berghe, the director general of 11.11.11. “Nothing has been rebuilt up to this point, except for some small repairs using the limited material available,” he said. People are living in tent camps, school buildings or temporary structures.

It will cost an estimated €4.4 billion to rebuild the damaged areas, but only 5% of that amount has been raised so far. The reconstruction is also hampered because Israel restricts the import of building material to Gaza, according to Brigitte Herremans of Broederlijk Delen.

The delegation is unusual in being granted access to Gaza. Delegations from the Netherlands and the European Parliament have been denied entry. Vanden Berghe explained that 11.11.11. was seen by the Israeli government as different from other organisations. “We have an impartial approach and listen to all sides in the conflict. We also met with the Israeli authorities to hear their side of the story.”

Belgium’s federal parliament voted earlier this month in favour of a resolution to recognise Palestine “when the time was right”.

“The failure to reach a solution is a breeding ground for hatred towards Israel that could go on for generations,” said De Vriendt.

Photo: Citizens of Gaza City continue to live amid the ruins

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