

PERFORMING THE DUTIES OF SECRETARY GENERAL IN A COUNTRY FACING PHYSICAL CHALLENGES SUCH AS EARTHQUAKES

Hafnaoui AMRANI (Algeria)

Mr Hafnaoui AMRANI (Algeria) *spoke as follows:*

The Parliament, as an official institution, is, following the example of the State's structures, concerned with all questions related to the country's national life.

This obvious fact is more and more faced, as regards the nature of the missions of the Parliament, on the basis of its place as well as its role as part of the country's institutional system.

In effect, this institution representative of the citizens in their different political, social and cultural components should be willing to listen to their legitimate aspirations and preoccupations.

As an example, however, the Parliament was fully involved in the recent catastrophes witnessed by our country.

It is worth recalling in this regard, that within two years, our country witnessed two major natural catastrophes (10.11.2001 Bab El Qued Flood, as well as 2 1.05.2003 earthquake) which have caused considerable human as well as material losses, for both the population and the national economy (see table below).

	Human Losses	Injured	Disappeared	Material Losses
Bab El Oued Flood	763	423	126	295 Million Dollars
Boumerdes Earthquake	2268	11455	—	5 Billion Dollars

Before these tragic events, the Parliament has taken a series of measures to contribute in facing the effects as well as consequences caused by these catastrophes.

This multifaceted contribution was made under the conduct of the Parliament Secretary General, and consisted, mainly, in a series of emergency measures taken in such a circumstance.

I. EMERGENCY MEASURES TAKEN BY THE PARLIAMENT

As soon as the above-mentioned catastrophes were announced, the Parliament decided on the following emergency measures.

- Setting up of an Emergency Committee: composed of the Parliament civil servants and headed by the Secretary General, the main missions of this committee are to:
 - make contact with the Parliamentarians and civil servants resident in the zones hit by the catastrophe.
 - collect all the information related to the catastrophe: zones hit, extent, first assessment of the human and material losses, etc;
- Meeting of the Parliament's Bureau: notably with a view to:
 - communicating and exchanging information about the catastrophe;
 - setting up a follow-up commission about the situation. Composed of Parliamentarians and civil servants, this commission is mainly in charge of enquiring about the event in question and permanently collecting all information related to the catastrophe, notably the extent of the losses caused, the consistence of first aid set up with the needs required.
- Collaborating with Governmental Authorities.

Within this framework, Parliamentarians and civil servants from the Parliament have been designated in order to strengthen the National Emergency Committee set up at the level of the Prime Minister's office and in charge of following-up the development of the situation in the catastrophe-hit zone, monitoring and coordinating aid actions and assistance at the national as well as international levels.

- Displacement Activity of the Following-up Emergency Committee in the Catastrophe-Hit Zone: this action aims notably at:
 - assessing the catastrophe extent, the losses caused, operations procedure, their organization, and their consistence., .etc;
 - enquiring about the Parliamentarians and civil servants~ as well as about the losses experienced, possibly, by their families, houses, possessions and properties., .etc;

II. ROLE OF THE PARLIAMENT'S SECRETARY GENERAL IN MANAGING THE CATASTROPHES

Given his position in the hierarchy of the Parliaments functions, competence as well as his capacity of hierarchical official in charge of the administrative and technical structures as a whole, the Secretary General has a predominant role to play as far as every internal or external action taken or intervention made by the Parliament is concerned.

Therefore, during the last natural catastrophes known by our country, the Parliament's Secretary General has been a key element in the assessment, coordination and follow-up of actions and measures taken by the Parliament, as part of his contribution to the national effort to face the catastrophes in question.

Within this framework, the Secretary General has mainly set up the following:

- the Parliament's Chairman and Parliamentarians information channel on all catastrophe aspects (extent, zones hit, losses, aid state, development of the situation... etc);
- the coordinator among the various contributors in caring for following-up the situation, notably between the national emergency committee and the local emergency committee (composed of parliamentarians and civil servants from the Parliament);
- the Parliament's authority for mobilizing human and material means as well as following-up the implementation of the Parliament's contribution in such a circumstance;

For that purpose, the Secretary General role consisted mainly in:

- gathering all the information related to the catastrophe in order to tally with and send to the parties concerned;
- assessing the catastrophe extent and the losses caused (human losses, material losses... etc.);
- assessing the actions and means set up by the Government and specialized bodies, (such as the Croissant Rouge Algerien — Algerian Red Crescent) to face the situation generated by the event (distress and panic within the population, aid and interventions emergency...);
- assessing the needs, material and human needs necessary to provide aid for the populations hit by the catastrophe.
- mobilizing the Parliament's human and material means.

III. THE PARLIAMENT'S CONTRIBUTION IN THE FIELD OF MANAGING AND PREVENTING AGAINST CATASTROPHES

The Parliament has, in its capacity of legislative power authority, as part of its constitutional competence and respect of the principal of separation of powers, contributed efficiently in managing and preventing against catastrophe risks.

This contribution ranged over aid provision and intervention, prevention as well as legislation.

A. At the level of aid provision and intervention

Given their capacity of local representatives, and consistently with their obligations, including the moral obligations, to be ready to listen to the citizens aspirations and complaints, the Parliaments members, individually or collectively, have taken actions and initiatives aiming at consolidating and reinforcing aid and assistance at the local as well as national levels.

In this regard, they notably endeavoured to:

- open local permanently manned offices in charge of coordinating donations collection, aid and assistance;
- contribute, in relation with the competent authorities, in organizing and reinforcing aid and assistance at the local level by mobilizing the citizens and militants;
- participate in organizing the collection of material and financial aid and assistance;

- contribute financially on their equity capital as well as on the capital of the party they belong to.

Furthermore, the Parliament, as part of regional and international inter-parliamentary relations, has taken actions to heighten foreign parliaments awareness and mobilize them to make their contribution, provide aid and assistance in such a circumstance.

B. At the level of financial contribution

In the framework of the national solidarity in benefit of citizens hit by the natural catastrophe the Parliaments members and civil servants have contributed financially to the national effort of help and assistance towards these catastrophes victims. This contribution has mainly consisted at the payment of a part of their parliamentary indemnities or their wages to the effected persons profit.

C. At the level of prevention

Given its constitutional purpose and competence, as a legislative authority, the Parliament has taken, since the occurrence of these catastrophes, diverse actions of prevention against such risks.

These actions were mainly construed by making recommendations aiming at reinforcing and improving the legislative system in force as far as construction, urbanization, environment and control are concerned, with a view of providing for and including norms, rules and measures of security and prevention against natural catastrophes.

Furthermore, the Parliament, as part of its activities of popularizing and reinforcing the parliamentary culture, organized on the 22nd September 2003 a conference on major risks in Algeria: problems and perspectives.

This action aims at heightening the awareness and informing the parties concerned as a whole about the question, on one hand, and to make a veritable diagnosis on the status of the legislative and statutory system in force as well as to make the recommendations deemed necessary in this regard, on the other hand.

D. At the level of legislation

As part of its constitutional competence, the Parliament has adopted a bill on special measures applicable to those who disappeared following the earthquake of the 21st May 2003.

This text aims at facilitating the actions and procedures in favour of the families of those who disappeared following this earthquake.

For that purpose, this new law has set a maximum 8 month time limit to certify that the disappearance and death have occurred, instead of the 4 years set before.

Furthermore, it sets the time limits within which the courts should deal posthaste with the files of the disappeared and indemnify their families, and guarantees the coverage of legal aid as part of the procedure set in this regard.

Mr Ian HARRIS, President thanked Mr AMRANI for his communication.

Mr Arie HAHN (Israël) said that it was essential that a Parliament should be able to continue its work, even after a catastrophe. In Israel were to secondary meeting places — one in Jerusalem, one outside the town — which could be used to within eight to 12 hours notice. In addition, Parliamentary work was systematically duplicated and the copiers were stocked in protected places.

Mrs Marie-Andrée LAJOIE (Canada) as a result of concerns arising from IT systems and the year 2000, on one hand, and a series unprecedented changes in the weather (snowstorms) on the other, a programme called Business Community Management had been started in Canada under which disaster planning had been undertaken, which included the possibility from the summer of 2004 of establishing an alternative Chamber with the shortest possible notice period.

All departments — in particular, the IT services — had been made aware of problems related to continuity of activity. Departments had been invited to establish a list of potential risks, to evaluate their probability and to prepare, in each case, a proper response strategy.

Mrs Heather LANK (Canada) said that similar arrangements had been made in the Canadian Senate: alternative buildings, plans to safeguard data, etc. This had led to a useful period of reflection on what was considered as essential to the activities of the Chamber, as opposed to what was of secondary importance.

Mr Tom DUNCAN (United States) said that there had been similar thinking in the United States, in particular in relation to the possibility of major natural catastrophes or unexpected events.

Mr Mamadou SANTARA (Mali) conveyed to Mr AMRANI the sympathy of the people of Mali for the people of Algeria for the events which they had had to live through. He asked for information on three points: was the crisis group which had been established in Algeria an ad hoc structure or had it been made permanent? What role did the Members of Parliament for the affected regions play? What had been the precise function of the Secretary-General during the events, from the point of view, in particular, of cooperation with the specialist services (civil protection, for example)?

Mrs I Gusti Ayu DARSINI (Indonesia) said that Indonesia had known in the past natural catastrophes, which had been comparable in their scale to those which had affected Algeria. The action taken had been, on the one hand, to finance intervention by allocation from Parliament's own budget and, on the other hand, to set up a temporary committee, which in particular had been able to go to the affected places to establish the scale of destruction.

Mr Hafnaoui AMRANI recognised that the Algerian Parliament had not been prepared for the possibility of the events of that nature and that it had been taken by surprise. In replying to the debate, he said:

- the crisis group had been only *ad hoc*, and had been active for about four months and then was wound up;
- the Members of Parliament for the affected areas had established local information bureaux is to assist victims, to keep them informed and to coordinate assistance;
- after these events the ORSEC plan had been completely rethought by the Government: years had been acted, for example, the frequent violation of planning rules and the absence of insurance for houses;

- it had been decided the future to create a specific budget line within the Parliamentary budget to deal with the future catastrophes.