

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' intervention on the incident in Farmakonisi at the European Parliament Plenary (Strasbourg, 5 February 2014)

E. VENIZELOS: Thank you very much, Mr. President. Ladies and gentlemen MEPs, I am here as the Presidency of the Council, but I naturally always maintain the capacity of Greek Foreign Minister. So, in these two capacities, I want – before anything else – to express the profound sadness of the Greek government and of the whole of Greek society at the lives lost at sea in the tragic incident, the tragic shipwreck, near Farmakonisi.

We have experienced many such tragedies in recent months, most notably in Lampedusa. Already today we have seen media reports that there is new pressure in the sea off Lampedusa.

Despite the constant and tireless efforts being made by the Greek authorities, and by the Coast Guard in particular, there are problems, because, as we had the opportunity to say in our previous debate on the pressure being experienced by Bulgaria, on Bulgaria's land borders, Greece, like the other southern European Mediterranean countries, has such extensive coastlines, has to protect such extensive European borders, that the mechanism is not always adequate, and we have to face incidents that are completely different from what we have experienced in the past, because the crisis – the civil war in Syria, the vast current of refugees that has been created – is generating a huge amount of pressure, and we have to face problems of this kind every day.

So the tragedy in Farmakonisi is a characteristic example of this serious migration pressure. Let me give you a few numbers.

Since August 2012, the situation in the Eastern Aegean Sea has deteriorated greatly. In 2008 we had 15,000 cases, which fell off impressively before the recent crisis in Syria, and in 2011 and 2012 we had fewer cases. But the situation has gotten worse since 2012. The Greek coast guard covers a region of over 2,000 square kilometers in the maritime region of the Eastern Aegean. And this area, of course, includes a great number of islands and islets. So far, it has proceeded to rescue actions for 3,120 persons, which corresponds to 29% of all those who have crossed the borders without documents and without the proper legal procedures.

In this case, the Turkish fishing vessel was spotted by the land forces based in Farmakonisi. The coast guard vessel on patrol was notified immediately and hastened to the area. The weather conditions were extremely inclement, and we ended with a real tragedy, because a great number of human lives were lost.

This incident increased our sensitivity greatly, as Shipping Minister Varvitsiotis had the opportunity to stress in a letter to the European Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Malmström. An independent judicial inquiry into these incidents has already been ordered and is being carried out.

We want to investigate the events fully; we want to find out the absolute truth. I want to assure you that no expediency will limit the breadth and depth of this investigation. The law will be implemented. We want this occurrence to function as a lesson and an example. I cannot prejudge the results of the inquiry. I know that Frontex, too – as I have read in the press – has its own data and its own records. The coast guard will present the data as recorded in their own mechanisms.

What is important is that we draw conclusions from this experience. As I had the opportunity to say in the previous debate, on Bulgaria, we have to see European solidarity, we have to see implementation of the European principle of equitable burden-sharing. We have to deal with the daily pressure, and at the same time shape an institutional framework that I had the

opportunity to set out in considerable detail in during the previous debate.

Migration policy is a priority of the Hellenic Presidency this semester, and of the Italian Presidency of the next semester; that is, the shaping of an even more comprehensive strategy for managing migration flows.

I remind you that the European Council has already dedicated two major debates to this issue – last October and last December. The Informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers that took place a few days ago, on 24 January, in Athens, gave the opportunity to the Ministers and the competent Commissioner, Ms. Malmström, to talk about what needs to happen in the post-Stockholm era, and our goal is, through the proposals the Commissioner presents, for this plan for managing migration flows to be completed at the June European Council.

Of course, this level of mid- to long-term programming does not respond to the daily pressures, the tragedies, the suffering, the exploitation, the organized crime that often hides behind innocent people, behind refugees seeking a better fortune, seeking protection from the inhumane conditions that exist in Syria and in other regions of the Middle East and North Africa.

So, on behalf of the Council and on behalf of the Greek government, I assure you that the investigation will be thorough, our sensitivity to this issue is absolute, and our cooperation with the Commission is also open and, I would like to hope, effective.

Thank you.

REPLY

Allow me to say, ladies and gentlemen MEPs, that in my long parliamentary career I have participated – a number of times, unfortunately – in debates in the National Parliament where matters of life and death, human tragedy, very easily become the subject of a political debate. I would ask you to acknowledge in me at least the same sensitivity each of you has to these issues; to respect for the value of human life, and to natural, spontaneous emotional and moral reaction to any act that results in the death of innocent people, and particularly the death of young children.

The Greek judiciary does not want to jump to conclusions about the results of the inquiry. And it is not jumping to conclusions. But no one else should prejudge it either; no one who is participating in a political discussion, democratic, parliamentary. Do we trust independent inquiry? An inquiry being carried out by the Public Prosecutor – a court inquiry – because in Greece the Public Prosecutor is part of the judiciary. It consists of permanent, independent judges who have no contact with the executive branch.

All of the incidents will be investigated and the law will be implemented strictly. Additionally, allow me to underscore that the government, through the Council of the EU, is expressed here by what I had the honor to say to you. What I said to you more than covers the statements that have been made by colleagues of mine in recent days. A few days after this tragic incident in Farmakonisi, on 24 January, Ms. Malmström had the opportunity to meet in Athens with Mr. Dendias and Mr. Varvitsiotis. She has a complete picture of their view.

It is true that we cannot put refugees, immigrants, those seeking asylum into different categories of quality. We cannot put any person into a category. The value of a human life is always the same. This is the fundamental principle of the equality of each person. And this naturally applies to immigrants, refugees, all of us.

Mr. Varvitsiotis, to whom I referred earlier, the Greek Minister of Shipping, for any of you who don't know who Mr. Varvitsiotis is, has already sent a letter to the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe, stating the Hellenic authorities' availability for full cooperation with the Council of Europe. I met yesterday morning with the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, and we talked in a practical and specific manner about how this discussion can and must be organized – this cooperation – with full respect for the competencies and sensitivities of the Commissioner.

At the beginning of her statement, Ms. Malmström made a very important distinction. She distinguished border control operations from search and rescue operations. And she characterized the incident in Farmakonisi as a search and rescue mission governed by the well-known rules, whether of the Chicago Convention or the Hamburg Convention.

We have dealt a great deal in Greece with search and rescue issues, for humanitarian reasons as well as for reasons that have to do with protecting our national sovereignty and national sovereign rights. And I fully agree that there can be no pushback of refugees except for that provided for in readmission agreement procedures.

But on the other hand, the truth is that if the EU, with the Commission, with Frontex, does not intervene effectively at the point of departure of these vessels – which exploit human suffering, with the result that organized gangs make large amounts of money – we will not get results. It would be ideal if we could consider applications for asylum on the coasts from where these vessels depart; vessels that do not respect the people they carry, exposing them to tragic and deadly risk. EU missions could be set up on the coasts of Turkey, Libya, Egypt and carry out this control. And if we really want to create a new generation of mechanisms, we have to see these mechanisms operate not on the European borders, but on the adjacent borders, whether maritime or land.

This is a debate that we have to carry out on a comprehensive policy for managing migration flows. Otherwise, we will be victims of the profound inequality that exists between the countries of the South, the Mediterranean countries, the countries on Europe's external borders, the countries that have thousands of kilometers of coastline, and the European countries, of course, that are inland and don't face such pressures.

We talk very often about solidarity. We talk very often about equitable burden-sharing. But the pressures are completely different and completely unequal. I think we are all speaking sincerely and frankly. And from this perspective, the debate is a great help towards putting things in order, with respect for human life. From this perspective, obviously everyone takes political responsibility, and I must admit that, during my political life, I, too, have many political responsibilities. Even for the presence of excellent colleagues in this hall.

Thank you very much.