

Meeting of the Standing Foreign Affairs Committee on the crisis in the Middle East “a disappointment” – MPs Francine Lalonde and Maria Mourani

OTTAWA, August 1/ – “I wanted the Foreign Affairs Committee to take an unequivocal position on the conflict in the Middle East and bring the government around to a more balanced position,” said Bloc Québécois Foreign Affairs Critic and MP for La Pointe-de-l’Île, Francine Lalonde, on leaving the meeting. “Unfortunately, between the systematic obstruction of the Conservatives, who didn’t want the Committee to take a stand, and the division in the ranks of the Liberals, who couldn’t manage to agree on the underlying causes of the conflict or what policy to adopt, the Committee had to limit itself to a minimalist position that doesn’t call for any radical change in government policy. I’m really disappointed.”

The Foreign Affairs Committee met at the instigation of the Bloc Québécois to discuss the situation in the Middle East. Francine Lalonde’s motion, which served as the basis for discussion, set out a certain number of principles and aimed at giving clear guidelines to the government:

- respect for international law and international humanitarian law;
- a condemnation of bombing that indiscriminately affects civilians;
- a rejection of the government’s biased and ill-advised policy, which is not helping to resolve the conflict;
- a condemnation of war as a way of resolving conflict in the Middle East, and a call for an immediate cease-fire on both sides;
- a reminder that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a necessity for peace in the region; and
- a call to continue with the evacuation, especially in southern Lebanon, and expand it to include permanent residents.

“The Committee contented itself with calling for an immediate cease-fire on both sides,” Ms Lalonde said. “That’s already quite something, but given that the Conservative policy is undermining Canada’s ability to play a constructive role, the Committee could and should have done more and better.”

The MP for Ahuntsic, Maria Mourani, who also attended the meeting, said she was especially upset that the Committee was not calling on the government to continue the evacuation. “My office has become a real crisis centre,” she said. “Every day I get desperate, heartbreaking calls from people about women, children or old people trapped under the bombs in southern Lebanon, and completely abandoned to their own resources. This morning the Foreign Affairs Minister did not promise to continue the evacuation, and this afternoon the Committee didn’t ask him to do so. I wouldn’t have believed that Canada could be so blithely unconcerned about human life.”

The debate on the Bloc motion followed the appearance of Foreign Affairs Minister Peter McKay earlier in the day. The Minister refused to call for an immediate cease-fire,

preferring to attach a series of conditions, refused to condemn the air strikes that are disproportionately affecting civilians, and went so far as to assert that Canada is unreservedly backing Israel because it is the only democracy in the region, forgetting that Lebanon is also a democracy.

“I never expected the government to take a position that would help resolve the conflict,” Francine Lalonde said, “but I hoped that parliamentarians could. The divisions among the Liberals, which reflect the divisions in English Canadian public opinion, prevented us from doing it. The Bloc Québécois found itself the only one supporting a plan for getting out of the crisis, and this is deeply regrettable.”