

Time for reflection

Martin Banks speaks to MEPs about global counter-terrorism 10 years after the September 11 attacks

The 110-storey landmarks that dominated the Manhattan skyline for nearly 30 years were reduced to rubble in the suicide attacks of September 11 2001. Thousands of people in the World Trade Centre, and on the planes that crashed into them, lost their lives.

Some commentators, including EU counter-terrorism coordinator Gilles De Kerchove and Nato secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen, argue that the world is safer today than in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the US, with global terror groups weaker than 10 years ago. Speaking to reporters in Brussels recently, De Kerchove said, "We still face a threat which is much more diversified than it was 10 years ago, but an attack of the scale and sophistication of the kind we had on September 11 is not really possible."

But others believe that there are still lessons to be learned from the tragedy. They include ALDE deputy Sophie in 't Veld who is parliament's rapporteur on the achievements and future challenges of EU counter-terrorism policy. She recently presented her report on counter-terrorism measures to fellow MEPs in the Strasbourg plenary.

She said that the anniversary is a time to "express our soli-

darity with the victims, the people who died in the attacks, and their loved ones". "But," she adds, "we should also draw lessons and reflect on our response to the attacks. "Checks and balances, democratic scrutiny and accountability are essential for a robust democracy." Her report calls for an "in-depth" evaluation of EU counter-terrorism policies. "On the basis of Article 70 of the treaty on the functioning of the EU, we request the commission to carry out such an evaluation, and to report back to parliament and the national parliaments," it says.

The Dutch MEP told the Parliament Magazine, "This evaluation should assess the effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures. It should verify if further measures are needed, but it should also identify measures that are unnecessary or disproportionate. The commission must clearly map out all European and national measures. It should also look at function creep into other areas, like regular crime, immigration

"Thousands of people in the World Trade Centre, and on the planes that crashed into them, lost their lives"





or public health.”

She added, “We also need to know the costs of counter-terrorism. It is fairly absurd that we pass one legislative measure after the other, without the slightest idea of the cost. During an economic crisis, it is fair to ask how much we spend, if the money is well spent, and if we have the right priorities.”

She has also called for “retro-active proportionality tests” and for an assessment of the impact on civil liberties and human rights “so as to ensure our policies meet our own standards of democracy and fundamental rights”. “We must investigate and repair when we got it wrong,” she said. “The counter-terrorism strategy was marked by mistakes and excesses. International law and human rights conventions have been repeatedly and knowingly violated.”

This autumn, parliament will draft a new report on the role of Europe in the CIA programme of illegal renditions and in ‘t Veld says it is “high time” member states also acknowledged Europe’s responsibility. “If not,” she warns, “how can they look the young protesters of the Arab spring in the eye, and credibly speak of democracy, freedom and human rights?”

Elmar Brok, the German EPP deputy who chairs parliament’s delegation for relations with the US, says terrorism can only be defeated by the international community. “One could say that the decade began with 9/11 and finished with the death of Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011,” he said. “I do not agree. The consequences of 9/11 are still present. The situation in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, the difficult balancing act between the protection of civil rights and security needs

and also the fact that the number of attacks on Christian communities has risen worldwide in 2010 demonstrate that the threat of terrorism continues.” Brok says an “international problem such as terrorism” can only be defeated by international cooperation. “The 10th anniversary of 9/11 should be used as occasion to remember that the US still is Europe’s closest friend and ally and that we must work closely together to prevent further terror attacks.”

Elsewhere, ALDE MEP Graham Watson says that a decade after September 11, “We have a calmer perspective from which to remember the victims and to reflect on our continued fight against extremism.” He said, “In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the world came together to act forcefully and decisively. We deepened the legal architecture to fight terrorism: we can now pursue terrorists outside our borders; we increased the obligations of all UN members to fight terrorism and we launched concrete steps to combat terrorist financing.

“We also made grave mistakes: we overstepped the boundaries of human rights in international rendition, indefinite prison terms and the ‘muscular interrogation’ techniques used. He added, “Ten years later, the question needs to be asked, have we made our societies any safer? I regret to say no. The reason is clear. There was a failure of the international community to address the lasting causes of terrorism – poverty, alienation, inequality, lack of future perspectives and lack of education. Nor did we exert enough effort to consolidate democracy in the Arab world or to search seriously for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.” ★