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## SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINE

Some 200 demonstrators yesterday poured into the streets of Valletta, to join the Palestinian community in solidarity with the people of Gaza, currently under attack by a heavy barrage of Israeli attacks. Palestinian officials say more than 360 people have been killed since Saturday. Four Israelis have died in rocket fire. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert yesterday said Israel's air assault on Gaza was only the first in several stages of operations, threatening further attacks on the small corridor of land.

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## GRTU divided over Farrugia's future

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THE Chamber of SMEs (GRTU) is in two minds as to whether Vince Farrugia would be able to stay on as director-general if he accepts the Nationalist Party's invitation to contest the MEP elections in June 2009.

The GRTU's statute precludes its president, secretary and treasurer from pursuing political careers.

But there is no corresponding veto for the post of director-general, and the chamber's council in fact appears to have been wrong-footed by the surprise announcement of Farrugia's possible candidature with the PN. Contacted by Malta-Today, its members are clearly divided on the issue.

GRTU president Paul Abela sees nothing wrong with Farrugia retaining his post with the chamber, while at the same time representing a political party at European level.

"Obviously it is his personal decision. But if he takes this step it will give the GRTU added value irrespective of with which political party Farrugia chooses to contest. Europe is no longer a divisive issue: both parties believe in it."

Abela also made it clear that Farrugia's candidature would not impinge on the chamber's neutrality. "We never took anybody's side. We have taken a firm stand against the way the new utility tariff system was implemented and we will soon

issue directives to members. We blocked the port when Alfred Sant was Prime Minister and we have done the same twice when the PN was in government."

But vice president Sandro Chetcuti was less convinced. Describing Vince Farrugia as a "second Mintoff" on account of his extraordinary negotiating skills, Chetcuti heaped lavish praise on the director-general while at the same time expressing misgivings on whether Farrugia could retain his role as GRTU director-general, while serving as an MEP.

"I believe that Farrugia has a remarkable ability to wear more than two hats simultaneously. But in Malta as soon as one contests with a political party, one is labelled a Nationalist or a Labourite. This could affect the credibility of the union. If only we were mature we could make a distinction, but Malta is what it is."

Chetcuti refused to commit himself on whether Farrugia's position as GRTU director-general would be tenable if he decides to contest as an MEP for the PN, limiting himself to saying that he would resign if the organisation's neutrality is impinged.

"As a council member I will insist that the GRTU remains neutral and at the very moment when the GRTU ceases to be neutral, I will leave the GRTU."

This contrasts slightly with the views of GRTU's outspoken deputy president, Philip Fenech,

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## New Year's Eve

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