Resolution on natural disasters

2007/2605(RSP) - 04/09/2007 - Text adopted by Parliament, topical subjects

Following the debate which took place during the sitting of 4 September 2007, the European Parliament adopted a joint resolution on the natural disasters which took place during the summer of 2007, making reference to the devastating fires and the violent floods which caused death and destruction throughout Europe, in particular in Greece and the United Kingdom. It also referred to the outermost regions, in particular Martinique and Guadeloupe, which were hit by Hurricane Dean, applicant countries and the EU's immediate neighbours. Parliament expressed its **strong solidarity** with the relatives of those who lost their lives and with residents in the affected areas, and paid tribute to the fire-fighters, professionals and volunteers who risked their lives to extinguish fires, rescue people and limit the damage, as well as to the many individual citizens who fought to save their livelihoods and their surrounding environment. It called on the Commission to **mobilise the current EU Solidarity Fund** (EUSF) in the most flexible manner possible and without delay, avoiding time-consuming procedures and administrative obstacles. The necessary resources need to be made available immediately for the purpose of relieving the suffering of victims and their immediate families by means of the EUSF, any other Community instrument (e.g. Structural Funds or the EARDF), or any other possible financial means based on the implementation conditions of the Community funds, such as the partnership principle and sustainable development.

Parliament also urged the Commission to **introduce extraordinary Community aid arrangements**, especially of a financial nature, so as to support the rehabilitation of the regions which have suffered heavy damage, restore the productive potential in affected areas, re-launch job creation and take appropriate measures to compensate the social costs inherent in the loss of jobs and other income sources. It emphasised the need to speed up the procedure to access EU funds for the recovery of agricultural land following floods and fires and for more financial aid to be made available for the development of flood defences. The Commission and Member States were urged to review and share best practices in the light of the latest research into the increased risks of flooding and forest fires caused by the way in which land, habitats and drainage are managed.

The report recognised the contribution of the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) in supporting the mobilisation and coordination of civil protection assistance during emergencies. It noted, however, that Member State resources to combat forest fires, especially by aerial means, are limited and that it is not always possible for Member States to offer support when the resources are needed on their national territory. As a result, that some Member States received less assistance than others and had to rely on bilateral agreements with non-EU states for assistance. Parliament regretted, therefore, that in some cases the EU as a whole failed to display sufficient solidarity.

Parliament strongly urged the Council to reach a decision, without further delay, on the proposed EU Solidarity Fund regulation, bearing in mind that Parliament adopted its position in May 2006. It considered the Council's delay in this respect unacceptable. The new regulation, which lowers the thresholds for the mobilisation of the EUSF, will make it possible to address damage in a more effective, flexible and timely manner.

Parliament went on to call for the **creation of a European force** that could immediately react in emergencies, as proposed in Commissioner Barnier's report of 9 May 2006, entitled 'For a European civil protection force: Europe aid'. It regretted the lack of response and follow-up in this regard, and emphasised, in this context, the need to continue the development of a rapid reaction capability based on the civil protection mechanisms of the Member States. The Commission was asked to draw up a proposal to this end, and Parliament emphasised the role of the Member States and their local authorities in effectively preventing and combating fires.

Recent experience had emphasised the need to **strengthen the Community civil protection prevention preparedness and response capability** in relation to forest and other wild fires, and Parliament strongly urged the Commission to take action to this end. The Commission was asked to examine the possibility of having prearranged access to a complementary capability to ensure a rapid response to major emergencies, which may be available from other sources, including the commercial market. Parliament suggested that the cost of the stand-by force could be covered using the Civil Protection Financial Instrument.

The resolution moved on to deplore the fact that so many of these forest fires appear to have been started by acts of arson. Parliament called on Member States, therefore, to strengthen penal sanctions for criminal acts that damage the environment and, in particular, for those causing forest fires. It voiced its concern at the growing number of disasters caused by extreme climatic events which, according to experts, may be attributed largely to global warming. Member States must take the necessary steps to comply with the Kyoto goals.

Parliament called for a reforestation policy based on respect for bio-climatic and environmental characteristics, emphasising the need to collect and register data relating to the natural resources of each Member State, through the creation of 'Green National Accounts' in the form of a database open to all citizens. Natural disasters, and in particular forest fires, have this year placed in considerable danger monuments and archaeological sites that are of major importance to the European cultural heritage. Parliament stressed the threat to Ancient Olympia, birthplace of the Olympic Games and, in particular, its museum, as a World Heritage Site, and asked for resources be made available immediately for the purposes of restoration should sites forming part of European cultural heritage be damaged by continuing forest fires.

Member States were urged to **ensure thatall burned forest areas remained forests** and covered by reforestation programmes, including compulsory conditions, and that no land use change be allowed. Parliament condemned the practice of legalisation of illegal construction on protected and generally non-authorised areas, and urged that all attempts at reducing forest protection via changes to the Greek Constitution be stopped immediately.

Lastly, Parliament considered that **Volunteer Civil Protection Action** should be promoted without delay, with basic training activities and equipment that might harness advanced technologies, since this was one of the major resources available to the Member States when dealing with states of emergency arising from natural disasters.