Resolution on stepping up the Union's disaster response capacity

2008/2588(RSP) - 19/06/2008 - Text adopted by Parliament, topical subjects

Following the debate which took place during the sitting of 16 June 2008, the European Parliament adopted, by 523 votes to 37 with 20 abstentions, a resolution tabled by Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety in response to the Communication from the Commission on reinforcing the Union's disaster response capacity. Parliament welcomes the Communication and considers that stepping up its disaster prevention and response capacity is a high-priority policy objective for the Union. The Commission's approach to disasters should be entirely coherent and consistent with its Communication on Europe's climate change opportunity and its proposal on Member States' efforts to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change is a key factor in the increased frequency and severity of natural disasters, and environmental policy. Climate change legislation must be pillars of the Union's disaster response capacity.

Parliament stresses that the Commission's approach should cover the full disaster cycle from prevention to recovery, and natural disasters, including extreme droughts and man-made disasters. The Commission is asked to present proposals as a matter of urgency, and no later than the end of 2008, regarding disaster prevention within the Union, together with an EU strategy for disaster risk reduction in developing countries. It should submit a package of legally binding instruments (e.g. a framework directive) with a view to filling in gaps in existing EU legislation, policies and programmes as regards disaster prevention and response. A comprehensive framework should comprise three pillars regarding prevention, with a view to stepping up prevention under existing EU mechanisms and Member State approaches, developing a new framework approach on disaster prevention and supporting further development of prevention knowledge and technology through EU research and development programmes.

Parliament regrets that the proposal made by former Commissioner Michel Barnier to create a European civil protection force remains a dead letter. It highlights the need to pursue the development of a rapid response capacity on the basis of the civil protection modules of Member States, in accordance with the mandate issued by the European Council meeting of 16 June 2006. Parliament calls on the Commission to develop a specific proposal to that end.

Members deplore the fact that the Council appears to have reached a decision not to proceed with the adoption of the new EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF) regulation, despite the strong support of Parliament for the revision of the existing instrument. They remind the Council that Parliament adopted its position by an overwhelming majority at first reading in May 2006, and that the dossier has been blocked in the Council for more than two years. They are convinced that the new EUSF regulation, which lowers the thresholds for the mobilisation of the Fund, will put the Union in a better position to address damage caused by disasters in a more effective manner. The European Council is strongly urged to take a decision not to reject this regulation. Parliament calls on the Commission to mobilise, when appropriate, the current EUSF in the most flexible manner possible and without delay. Procedures for mobilisation of the Solidarity Fund need to be reviewed in order to speed up payment of aid.

Parliament goes on to ask the Commission to carry out more research geared to improving forest fire prevention and forest fire-fighting methods and materials and to review planning and land use. Member States are urged to take strong action to improve their forest protection legislative framework and to abstain from commercialisation, reclassification and privatisation activities, thus limiting intrusion and

speculation. All available EU know-how, including satellite systems, should be used to this end. The resolution reiterates the call to put forward a directive on preventing and managing fires.

Other recommendations include the following :

- making optimal use of the funding opportunities provided under the Structural Funds and other Community funds;

- strengthening the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) with the human and material resources necessary to enable it actively to support the operations launched by the Member States under the Community Civil Protection Mechanism;

- setting up a sustainable European disaster response training network, covering all phases of disaster management, and to present proposals for such a structure as soon as possible, with further enhancement both of the preparedness of civil protection services and of the capacity of teams and modules from different Member States to work together;

- taking forward initiatives to improve early warning systems and alert signals for disasters;

- including the issue of adequate EU funding for disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery in proposals for the budgetary review 2008/2009;

- ensuring the efficiency of the single European emergency number 112;

- acknowledging at Community level the specific nature of natural disasters occurring in the Mediterranean, such as drought and forest fires, and adapting Community prevention, research, risk-management, civil-defence and solidarity tools accordingly so as to improve the response to this type of disaster in each Member State.