

# Setting up an EU rapid response capability

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The Committee on Development adopted the report drafted by Iva ZANICCHI (EPP, IT) which contains a proposal for a European Parliament recommendation to the Council on setting up an EU rapid response capability.

Members recall that the multiplication of major disasters (natural/man made) outside the European Union in recent years has led to increased calls to improve the effectiveness of the existing EU disaster response capacity. The multiplication and greater frequency of interventions inside and outside the European Union are compounded by the global financial situation and budgetary constraints which underline the need for more cost effective operations.

Progress has been made in recent years towards a more coherent EU disaster response, notably through progressive strengthening of the civil protection mechanism. The European Union's response to the earthquake in Haiti triggered not only a rapid, significant and large scale humanitarian aid intervention but also the activation of the civil protection mechanism which was able to deploy immediately and for the first time two modules (a water purification unit and an advanced medical post) financed through a 2008 Preparatory Action for an EU rapid response capability. Lessons learned from recent crises continue to demonstrate the need to improve the EU's disaster response in terms of efficiency, coordination and visibility.

However, Members consider that these disasters have once again highlighted the need for an EU rapid response capability (**European civil protection force**).

Against this background, the committee addresses the following recommendations to the Council:

- it urges the Council to strengthen the EU's disaster response capacity as a high priority, especially in view of the discussions on setting up an EU Civil Protection Force, and to follow up the European Parliament's repeated requests that the proposals put forward in the Barnier report in 2006 should be implemented;
- it calls for the immediate establishment of an EU Civil Protection Force which must be adequately equipped with the necessary technological and technical resources;
- calls also, in the context of operations following a natural disaster, for better coordination between the humanitarian agencies and the civil protection mechanisms of the Member States and DG ECHO, and any future European civil protection force;
- it urges the Commission to develop programs with national governments, local authorities and civil society organisations in beneficiary countries with regard to community-based disaster prevention and response management capacity;
- it encourages the Council to adopt, under the ordinary legislative procedure, measures (to be proposed by the Commission) for improving the predictability and the forward-planning capacity of the current EU civil protection mechanism, which is currently based on ad-hoc and voluntary contributions from Member States: these measures may include arrangements tested under the EU Preparatory Action including EU-level assets, voluntary pooling of resources, mapping of existing capacities, identification of scenarios and the development of further training activities;
- it calls also for realistic budgets in which appropriations for natural disasters or humanitarian action are allocated on the basis of previous years' spending.

On a structural and financial level, the European civil protection force should be based on:

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the commitment by some Member States to voluntarily make available pre-determined civil protection modules that are ready to intervene immediately in EU operations coordinated by the MIC, that most of these modules, which are already available nationally and thus would not entail significant additional costs, would remain under their control, and that the deployment of these modules placed on standby would form the nucleus of the EU's civil protection system for responding to disasters inside and outside the EU;

- the provision of additional civil protection modules which could be financed by the EU for certain specific requirements where gaps have been identified and where the European level would add value, and stresses the importance of increasing funding for transport and developing standby transport modules;
- the need to develop a comprehensive and proactive approach in response to disasters, coordinating the various means of action available to the Union and its Member States, such as crisis management (civil and military), financial assistance and development or social and environmental policies. The committee believes in this context that the transition between disaster response and post-disaster reconstruction should be managed more efficiently.

Others proposals are outlined in the report. They suggest:

- setting up a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps in accordance with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty (Article 214(5));
- providing localised coordination efforts, in cooperation with the national government of the affected state, using EU and Member States' representatives on the ground to ensure a targeted and competent response to affected localities;
- that operations be conducted in compliance with the principles of international law and with the principles of impartiality, neutrality and non-discrimination;
- clarifying the arrangements for cooperation and coordination between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission for the management of a large-scale disaster response outside the territory of the European Union;
- cooperation on the implementation of a visibility action plan that should include concrete measures to enhance the visibility of the EU's disaster response;
- using the Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) system to keep potential crisis areas under surveillance.

Lastly, Members remind the Council that the use of military assets and capabilities in disaster response, particularly for logistics, transport and infrastructure support for humanitarian aid operations, should be exceptional, used as a 'last resort' and always in compliance with existing agreements. Military means often constitute an important contribution to disaster response, along with civil protection and humanitarian aid, and notes that military assets can be necessary for filling critical capacity gaps (particularly strategic lift, specialised assets, heavy engineering and transport). They therefore stress the need to develop a comprehensive approach and to improve synergies between civil and military capabilities, and to identify areas in which Member States can pool their efforts and capabilities at EU level to contribute to EU disaster response, which is particularly important in a difficult economic climate. The report emphasises the need to build up permanently available civilian capabilities in the EU which operate independently from military structures and to identify areas in which Member States can pool their efforts and capabilities at EU level in this respect.