Towards a stronger European disaster response: the role of civil protection and humanitarian assistance

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution in response to the Commission communication entitled: ‘Towards a stronger European disaster response: the role of civil protection and humanitarian assistance’.

The resolution states that there has been a dramatic increase in the number and severity of these natural and man-made disasters affecting the Union and its citizens, as well as other countries and regions around the world, as tragically demonstrated by the recent severe catastrophe in Japan. The recent tragedies, such as the Haiti earthquake and the Pakistan floods, have demonstrated that the main tools available to the EU for responding to disasters (humanitarian aid and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism) proved to be working well for what they were designed for and given the circumstances, but whereas there is a **vital need to further reinforce the coordination of the response to disasters affecting the European Union**, both within and outside its borders.

(1) A qualitative shift:Memberswelcome the communication and its objectives. They support the Commission’s proposal to establish a European emergency response capacity, including arrangements to guarantee the more predictable availability of Member States’ key assets. They endorse the need for a **qualitative shift from the current ad hoc coordination to a predictable and pre-planned system** within the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

The Commission is called upon to **bring forward proposals as soon as possible for establishing an EU civil protection force**, based on the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and enabling the Union to bring together the resources necessary for providing civil protection and immediate emergency relief aid to the victims.

According to Members, the European disaster response should build both on a European emergency response capacity through the strengthening of the European Civil Protection Mechanism based on the capacities and availability of pre-identified and therefore predictable Member States’ emergency assets and on a European emergency response centre as the cornerstones of such a strategy. They underline that these developments should follow an **all-hazards approach**, bringing together all relevant players – in particular civil society – including non-governmental organisations and volunteers, for joined-up action, and should exploit synergies among the various existing tools and instruments.

The resolution emphasises that the European disaster response system should **respect the principle of subsidiarity** both of the Member States (who should be able to use their own assets, especially in any case of conflicting national needs) and of the United Nations.

The Commission is invited, when setting up the European disaster response capability, to take into account the **Solidarity Clause** and its implementation arrangements, which need to be adopted as a matter of urgency and which will ensure a more effective and coherent response to disasters inside and outside the European Union.

(2) European Emergency Response Capacity: Parliament considers that the **pool of pre-identified capacities, resources and assets made available on a voluntary basis for EU disaster relief interventions**, both inside and outside the Union, will constitute the nucleus of the EU relief capability,

which could be complemented by additional ad hoc offers from the Member States. The resolution recommends that a clear and detailed **scheme of incentives** should be designed in order to permit Member States to commit sufficient capacities to the voluntary pool without increasing the overall spending of the Member States.

Members call on the Commission, along with the Member States, to identify existing capacity gaps. The creation of EU-level assets should be considered, **avoiding any form of competition and/or overlap with national assets**, in order to fill existing capacity gaps where they would result in significant savings for the EU as a whole or enable access to assets that are not available for Member States acting alone, thus offering a good model for burden-sharing.

The resolution considers: (i) **advanced planning** and the preparation of operations by developing reference scenarios; (ii) **mapping Member States' assets** potentially available for deployment in EU disaster relief operations and (iii) **contingency planning** as key elements of an enhanced EU disaster response and essential for rapid deployment and immediate appropriate response to each emergency.

Members call in particular for adequate planning for specific contingencies to respond to manmade disasters related to oil spills, nuclear installations or involving hazardous substances both on land and at sea.

(3) European Emergency Response Centre: Members welcome the Commission's decision to merge the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) and ECHO humanitarian aid crisis room to create a genuine 24 /7 Emergency Response Centre as a planning and operational coordination platform as a step in the right direction and call for this also to be implemented in real-time cooperation by the Member States, in compliance with the principle of subsidiarity, in the areas of monitoring, issuing early-warnings and sounding the alarm. They call for an **effective merging of the ECHO crisis room and the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC)**, whilst ensuring adequate funding.

The Commission is called upon to: (i) actively involve the new European Emergency Response Centre in the two Community tools to protect forests from forest fires: EFFIS and EFFICS; (ii) coordinate actions in case of emergency, simplifying and optimising the existing universal service and the 112 emergency number.

(4) Disaster Response, preparedness and prevention: the resolution stresses the vital need to complement the policy for enhancing the EU's emergency reaction capacity by stepping up the EU's and Member States' risk prediction and prevention policies.

Parliament encourages the Commission to prepare a **comprehensive and innovative EU strategy on disaster risk reduction**. It calls for sufficient resources to be dedicated to early identification of possible disasters and ask the Commission to ensure that the revision of the Structural Funds and the Solidarity Fund are used to encourage the development of policies and investments in these areas.

The Commission should present a **proposal, similar to the Floods Directive, to promote the adoption of an EU policy on water scarcity, drought and adaptation to climate change**. Members also reiterate, in this context, the importance of establishing the European Drought Observatory, which would be responsible for studying, mitigating and monitoring the effects of drought. Members consider that the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) can constitute an important instrument for further strengthening transnational, cross-border and interregional cooperation, even with countries which are not EU Member States.

Lastly, the resolution calls for a **comprehensive communications strategy**, involving all EU institutions, Member States, social partners and civil society that will improve the overall visibility and transparency of European actions in beneficiary countries as well as among European citizens, while ensuring that disaster relief is never subordinate to trading or political and strategic concerns.