Allegations of infringements or poor administration under Community transit procedures

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The European Parliament has decided to set up its first committee of inquiry in order to examine allegations of infringements or poor administration under the Community transit procedures (OJ C7 of 12 January 1996). The committee of inquiry is instructed to examine: - the cause of the crisis in Community transit procedures, - the defects and shortcomings in and the measures taken to improve the procedures, - additional measures which need to be taken immediately, - the measures taken or which need to be taken in order to recover the sums lost and punish those guilty of infringements. The committee of inquiry will be chaired by Mr John TOMLINSON (PSE, UK) and the rapporteur will be Mr Edward KELLETT-BOWMAN (PPE, UK). It must report to the European Parliament within one year from now. It should be noted that the remit of the committee is not limited solely to the Community transit procedures. It was considered necessary to extend the scope of the inquiry to competing transit systems and to links between fraud under the system and customs fraud in general. Action by the committee of inquiry. The committee of inquiry has met several times since January 1996, mainly to acquaint the members of the committee with the nature and extent of the weaknesses in the transit procedures, which it did by inviting representatives of the Commission and the Court of Auditors and the heads of external agencies. As soon as it started work, the committee of inquiry published a call for testimonies (OJ C of 29 February 1996), inviting people with information of interest to the committee to submit written testimonies. The committee held 16 witness hearings between 26 March 1996 and 17 December 96 (65 witnesses were heard from 32 difference agencies). All the witness hearings gave rise to a multilingual report in extenso. The committee received 41 written testimonies in reply to its call for testimonies. In addition, during a special meeting in Brussels on 5 February 1996, the 15 permanent representatives of the Member States were invited to cooperate fully with the committee, mainly by: a) publicizing the remit and work of the committee of inquiry in their countries; b) supplying the name of a national in a position of responsibility with whom the committee could correspond directly in order to guarantee fast and efficient exchanges of information; c) notifying the committee of the rights of witnesses before the courts in their country; d) supplying information on national experience, both good and bad, on the 5 points of the committee's remit (detailed statistics); e) providing the documents needed for the committee to complete its remit either on request or on their own initiative. On 26 March 96, the committee held interviewed Commissioners Mario MONTI (in charge of customs) and Anita GRADIN (in charge of fraud) at length. Throughout 1996, the committee and its delegations went on several fact-finding missions to various places within the EU. They visited Geneva, Austria (Austro-Slovakian border), Rome and Naples, Hamm (central German transit office) and the port of Antwerp. Finally, in addition to formal hearings, reports and visits, the committee arranged several information meetings with representatives from DG XXI at the European Commission in charge of customs and heard reports from external agencies, especially the International Road Transport Union based in Geneva, which manages the TIR system which complements the Community transit procedures. It should be noted that the rapporteur drafted three interim reports while the committee was carrying out this work, summarizing the results obtained and identifying the areas which merited attention.