Human rights in the European Union. Annual Report, June 1998 to June 1999

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PURPOSE : to present a report from the Austrian Presidency on the reinforcement of its human rights actions and instruments. CONTENT : in line with the wishes of the European Council which met in Vienna on 11-12 December 1998, the Council submitted a report identifying avenues to reinforce its capacity to achieve its objectives in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The fields examined concern the following points : - joint evaluation of human rights in the world by increased coordination and by the publication of an annual report on human rights : to this effect, this annual report from the Union, the first of its kind, covering the period from 1 June 1998 to 30 June 1999, seeks to explain how the Union's progress towards integration is paralleled in the field of human rights (refer to document INI/1999/2002). The report aims to increase transparency of Union policy on human rights and to reinforce it; - cooperation development in the field of human rights thanks to education and training activities carried out with other interested organisations, as well as programmes in 15 European universities (an ad hoc budget line for these programmes might be considered) ; - to reflect on the opportunities offered by holding an annual forum on human rights with the involvement of the Union institutions and NGOs in order to strengthen dialogue between parties in this field (the first forum is planned for the end of 1999); - increase the means enabling a response to international operational demands with respect to human rights by creating a common file of European experts on the subject, with a view to operations defending human rights on the ground (actions of this type may be initiated in the framework of election observations); - development and consolidation of democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights in third countries: since 11.05.1999, the Union has at its disposal 2 instruments that seek to consolidate democracy and respect of human rights in the form of distinct budget lines from which many activities which aim to support human rights and democracy are funded (1999 : EUR 98 million); - greater coherence in the Union's actions by examining the ways to reinforce the Union's competent structures : the idea is to favour an inter-pillar approach to human rights. Concerning the structure, a CFSP "Human Rights" Working Group and its cooperation with other working groups is on the agenda. It is also hoped that the implementation of a Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit may improve the structures of the Union in this field. Regional initiatives are also envisaged : this is notably the case in ex-Yugoslavia with the Process on Stability and Good Neighbourliness. There is also a need to strengthen the Union·s unanimous voice at international level within fora such as the Human Rights Commission (55th session of this Commission in Geneva), the Council of Europe and the OSCE. On an internal level, it is also important to mention the intense work carried out to combat against racism and xenophobia, as well as the international activity carried out by the Union with a view to promoting the gradual abolition of the death penalty.