Human rights: activities of the European Union in 1996. Annual memorandum

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This was one of the conclusions reached by José BARROS MOURA (PES, P), whose report on human rights in the world (1997/98) was adopted unanimously by the Committee. Mr Barros Moura placed particular emphasis on this new dimension of the problem and on the need to go beyond the usual approach of simply evaluating whether or not human rights were being observed. He believed the issue needed to be raised not only with states and the EU institutions but also with all economic and social actors as well as the international institutions. The effects of globalisation meant that action was needed more urgently than ever in various fields. Civil and political rights, although still essential, were not in themselves enough to ensure respect for human dignity. The committee deplored "the devastating social consequences of Third World debt" and called on international financial institutions "to integrate the respect of fundamental social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights in their activities". It called on the Commission and Council to actively promote a reform of the international financial institutions to achieve greater transparency in market movements and stronger supervision of financial markets. The business community also needed to face up to its responsibilities. New voluntary codes of conduct should be encouraged and MEPs rejected the contention that the introduction of a code of conduct obliging EU-based companies to observe human rights norms in their operations in third countries was not possible within Community law as it stood. They also reaffirmed support for the creation of a "social label", to ensure observance of human rights by companies operating in developing countries. In addition, the report not only highlights the difficulty of exercising rights which could be described as "traditional", by denouncing violations of such rights (e.g. of refugees, minorities and women), it also emphasises "new" rights (economic, social and sexual), which are violated particularly often in the case of women and children. In this connection, the committee regrets that three Member States have not yet signed ILO Convention 138 on Child Labour. The report also reaffirms its belief that an International Criminal Court is needed to deal with genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Lastly, Mr Barros Moura's report says loud and clear that Parliament will not hesitate to withhold its assent from international agreements which do not contain appropriate human rights provisions.