Development cooperation: relations with ACP countries involved in armed conflicts

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The committee adopted the report by Johan VAN HECKE (EPP-ED, B) on the Commission communication reviewing cooperation with ACP countries involved in armed conflicts. Although the committee felt the Commission paper was "thoughtful, focused and persuasive", it put forward a number of proposals seeking to improve and update it, particularly in the light of the Cotonou ACP-EU Partnership agreement signed in June 2000. It believed, for example, that greater emphasis should be placed on improving the coherence and coordination of EU policies in this area. In addition it stressed the need for conditionality - linking debt relief and aid to good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law. There should be clear criteria for the suspension of aid, in contrast to what the committee saw as the current "ad hoc" system. It also believed there should be better control of EU spending, with an end to unspecified budgetary support to countries involved in armed conflicts and more transparency from ACP countries in their finances. The European Parliament, it argued, should be given a more prominent role in the freezing of aid and any subsequent decision to release it. The committee also called for more emphasis to be given to conflict prevention, management, and resolution. In particular, it urged the EU to combat the illegal trade in arms and diamonds and called for the establishment of an international convention to regulate the diamond trade and for the setting-up of an international institution to control the trade. The committee wanted there to be a clear distinction between direct aid going straight to the governments of warring countries, and indirect aid that could be channelled through NGOs or UN agencies. The latter form of assistance should be extended in all situations where the need existed and where there was a firm guarantee that it would benefit the civilian population. Finally, the report called on belligerents to protect aid workers and allow them to carry out their work unhindered, particularly local staff members who stay behind in conflict zones after the evacuation of their foreign colleagues.