Annual report on human rights in the world in 2002 and European Union's human rights policy

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Bob van den BOS (ELDR, NL) reviewing human rights around the world in 2002 and the EU's human rights policy. It began by stressing the urgent need for the EU to set an example by conducting a more consistent policy to combat human rights violations. While there was no lack of formally agreed ambitions, in practice national interests often gained the upper hand and prevented the EU acting more forcefully. The committee called for firm application of the human rights clauses included in cooperation and association agreements with non-EU countries. Enforcing these clauses required, above all, political will on the part of the EU Member States, but clear mechanisms were also needed to keep up the pressure to improve human rights in the countries concerned. However, the committee complained that it was not involved in the decision-making process leading to consultations or the suspension of an agreement, and it called on the Council to involve MEPs more in these matters. The report underlined the importance of engaging in genuine political dialogue with non-EU countries and of integrating human rights into the EU's external policies. MEPs called for the EU to play a more vigorous role at the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) but they believed that the standing of this body was suffering from growing politicisation. The UNHRC's debates and resolutions, they said, did not reflect the real human rights situation but the degree of support for countries accused of human rights violations. MEPs expressed disappointment that the EU had not sponsored a resolution on China or Iran at the 59th session of the UNHRC. In addition, in 2002 and 2003 the UNHRC rejected resolutions on Chechnya and Zimbabwe. The report said that "human rights dialogues.... must not be turned into mere talking-shops, or be confined to exchanges of views on cultural and historical differences". It called for special dialogues with Mediterranean countries, Russia, Ukraine, the south Caucasus countries and the Balkan states. It asked the Council to assess the EU's structured dialogues with Iran and China and urged the governments of these two countries to allow in the UN's special rapporteurs on human rights. The committee warmly supported the International Criminal Court (ICC) and urged that its statute be ratified as broadly as possible. The report also called on all states which still have the death penalty to introduce a moratorium on any pending executions. In addition, the United States was urged to drop its policy of discouraging governments from ratifying the Rome Statute by means of "bilateral non-surrender agreements". The report also called for a commission to be set up under the mandate of the UN Secretary-General and/or the Security Council to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity committed under the Iraqi regime. The Council and Commission were urged to emphasise in discussions under political dialogue the importance of protecting the fundamental freedom of religion and belief or non-belief. There was a need to respond effectively in the event of serious and persistent violations of freedom of thought, conscience and religion in third countries, and to avoid double standards. MEPs therefore called for guidelines to be devised for EU policy towards third countries on freedom of religion and freedom of expression. The report condemned totalitarian regimes which suppress and try to control religious belief and simple worship or which discriminate against minorities or non-approved religions. It also drew attention to the contradiction between certain punishments and practices under Islamic law and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The Council and Commission were urged to enter into dialogue with leading Islamic scholars with a view to identifying such punishments and developing alternatives. MEPs also underlined the key role of education in deepening mutual understanding and respect for different religions. They called on the Council and Commission to seek to prevent violent religious extremism through dialogue with the relevant leaders. Lastly, they said that the media should be discouraged from creating stereotyped images of other religions as enemies. Finally, the report also looked at human rights issues relating to children (including the problem of child soldiers), disabled people, prison conditions and indigenous peoples.