Turkey's progress towards accession. Strategy paper and 2003 report

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The committee adopted the report by Arie OOSTLANDER (EPP-ED, NL) on Turkey's progress towards accession. MEPs' verdict was that Turkey had undertaken many important reforms since last year in order to meet the Copenhagen political criteria for EU membership but still needed to go much further and rigorously implement the reforms in many areas. They therefore recommended that the Union give absolute priority to these political criteria before starting negotiations on the adoption of EU legislation. The Commission should, as part of the Pre-Accession Strategy, systematically address the shortcomings in the rule of law and the democratic deficit. MEPs praised the strong motivation and political will demonstrated by the government and by most Turkish MPs in favour of making the necessary reforms, which were revolutionary for Turkey. However, such reforms were still at the early stage of what promised to be a long process, involving fundamental decisions for which European aid would remain essential. The committee welcomed the constitutional changes laid down in seven "harmonisation packages" but said that a new Constitution was probably needed. MEPs criticised the continuing influence of the army in politics, business, culture and education, continuing torture practices and mistreatment, the intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders, the discrimination of religious minorities and the fact that trade union freedom was not fully guaranteed. They also condemned the political persecution of such political parties as HADEP and DEHAP. They were unhappy with the way the trial reopened against Sakharov Prize winner Leyla Zana and three other former DEP MPs was progressing and called for an amnesty for them. The government should as soon as possible put a proposal for the abolition of the state security courts before parliament. Turkey should also speed up the implementation of certain cultural rights allowing education in and use of languages other than Turkish in the media, especially Kurdish. The Kurdish regions should be provided with the necessary means to stimulate their socio-economic development. The report pointed out that the EU itself must also be prepared for Turkey's possible accession and the resulting new geo-political situation. The Commission should therefore carry out a study of the impact of Turkey joining, including the need to reform the agricultural and structural funds policies. The EU should have a common security and defence policy with regard to possible new EU external borders and it should do more to support Turkey in the fight against terrorism. Turkey would significantly enhance European security and give EU policy in the region greater authority and effectiveness. In the end, MEPs said, it would be up to Turkey to decide whether it wanted, or would be able, to accept the political principles and values of the EU as appropriate for Turkey's state and society. Greater efforts must therefore be made both to increase knowledge of these values among Turkish citizens and to increase knowledge of Turkey among EU citizens. Lastly, the committee once more stressed that settlement of the Cyprus conflict was an essential condition for progress on Turkey's EU membership application. It also called on Turkey to reopen its borders with Armenia and promote good neighbourly relations with that country.