Humanitarian aid and ECHO. Annual reports 2000 and 2001

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The committee unanimously adopted the report by Marie-Arlette CARLOTTI (PES, F) on the Commission's annual report on humanitarian aid. It began by pointing out that ECHO's mission was to provide emergency aid aimed at immediately saving lives, and therefore welcomed the refocusing of its activities on this basic mandate. It also stressed that humanitarian aid should not be subject to the political conditionality which prevailed in other areas of development aid. The committee's main concern centred around the lack of funding allocated to emergency aid and the systematic use of the budgetary reserve, which had come to be seen as nothing short of a budgetary 'second tranche'. It therefore called for ECHO's budget to be brought up to EUR 500-550 million for the next few years in order to restore the reserve's original role as an exceptional, one-off facility. The committee was also keen to ensure that disaster prevention and preparedness were considered as priorities in promoting a 'culture of prevention' as a central plank of the EU's external action. To this end, greater use should be made of new technologies, and the committee also recommended that the percentage of overall humanitarian funding allocated to DIPECHO (for risk preparedness measures) be stepped up to reach 5% by 2005. The committee added that the methodology adopted for ECHO in 2001 should be swiftly made operational so that 'forgotten crises' could be more effectively taken into account. The Commission was also urged to ensure greater involvement of the other development instruments in seeking the most appropriate way of linking emergency relief, rehabilitation and long-term development strategy (LRDD). Moreover, the committee reiterated its request to the Council and Commission to set up a coordination platform for all the Member States' relief services in the event of major humanitarian disasters and stressed the need for greater coordination in general, between the Directorates-General of the Commission, between the Member States themselves and between the UN specialised agencies. The report also stressed that the public must be made more aware of the EU's humanitarian action, in the interests of democratic accountability. The Council and the Member States were urged to promote greater visibility for EU policy and ECHO's activities by ensuring that the combined humanitarian aid provided by Member States and the EU systematically appeared in statistics. Other recommendations included measures to ensure more effective protection of humanitarian personnel, including allowing administrative and technical staff to benefit from the provisions of the 1961 Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations. Finally, the committee stressed the need for proper parliamentary scrutiny of EU humanitarian aid and urged that full use be made of the provisions of Parliament's revised Rules of Procedure enabling it to be exercised effectively (in particular, by means of extraordinary debates and oral or written questions). It also hoped that Parliament would in future deliver its opinion before September on the basis of an annual report published by ECHO around 31 March.