Civil protection: Community action programme 1998-1999

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The committee adopted with amendments, the draft report (PE 214.470) by Mrs Laura GONZÁLEZ ÁLVAREZ (EUL/NGL, Sp) on a proposal for a Council Decision establishing a Community action programme in the field of civil protection. The purpose of the Commission proposal is to establish a Community action programme in the field of civil protection so as to make it easier to deal with disasters of all kinds, including environmental emergencies, such as floods, earthquakes, drought, forest fires, etc. The committee's rapporteur, Mrs González Álvarez, was very pleased with the Commission proposal, pointing out in her explanatory statement that the 580 disasters recorded by the UN in 1994 had caused 16 000 deaths and huge financial losses. She believed that the programme would contribute to increasing environmental protection provided that the projects and action undertaken were based on scientific techniques and developments which offered the highest level of protection and respect for the environment. Accordingly, the committee adopted a number of amendments to the Commission proposal, including one stressing the need to use "those techniques which best safeguard the environment". It also took the view that many disasters, including natural disasters such as floods, could be prevented by a more understanding approach to environment. Another amendment noted that "the scant action taken by the Community in this field since 1985 had not made it possible to develop effective cooperation between the Member States with the necessary urgency and determination". By contrast, the pooling of experience and mutual assistance under the proposed programme would make "more tangible the goals of social cohesion, solidarity and European citizenship". Another amendment said that the aim of the action was in particular "to enhance prevention, the ability of European citizens to protect themselves against risks and crisis situations at local level, the coordination of regional and subregional potential when combating major disasters, and, above all, exchanges of experience at all levels". The committee was particularly concerned to involve decision-makers at local and regional levels. The committee rejected amendments seeking to turn the Advisory Committee to be set up to help the Commission implement the programme into a Management Committee. It feared that the Commission's discretion would be fettered by interference from Member State representatives, who would have stronger representation on a management committee. The committee paid particular attention to the special needs of the Community's outlying regions (the FOD and TOM, the Canary Islands, Ceuta and Melilla, the Azores, Madeira, etc), which are particularly prone to emergencies such as typhoons, tidal waves, etc. It adopted an amendment recognizing that "the geography, landscape and social and economic characteristics of the Union's isolated and ultraperipheral regions affect and impede the bringing in of aid and means in cases of major risk". Another amendment called on the Commission, together with the Member States concerned, to investigate the possibility of presenting a scheme of specific measures for the Union's isolated and ultraperipheral regions in conjunction with third countries. Commenting in her explanatory statement on the need to cooperate with third countries, Mrs González Álvarez said:"We should not forget that emergencies and ecological disasters know no frontiers". The committee also wanted the isolated and ultraperipheral regions to receive a higher level of financing under the programme than other regions. It rejected cost-cutting amendments from Parliament's Committee on Budgets. According to another amendment, information campaigns should pay particular attention to the conservation of natural resources, the application of safety standards and the need to be prepared in situations of potential risk. Inter alia, the general public should be made more aware of health hazards which could arise from specific disasters, such as the accidental release of toxic materials.