Respect for human rights in the European Union in 1996

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The Committee adopted the report on respect for human rights in the EU in 1996 drawn up by Aline PAILLER (EUL/NGL, F). The vote was: 13 for, 12 against, 0 abstentions. According to Ms Pailler, 1996 was a year in which serious problems emerged in connection with immigration and the right of asylum. The EU, she said, needed to establish specific rights for immigrants and asylum applicants as quickly as possible. She was also extremely worried about the rise of racism and the increase in social exclusion. However, she welcomed the fact that the committee had devoted particular attention to combatting discrimination against women. The report re-emphasises the belief of MEPs that human rights must be fully respected by all the Member States - both within the Union and outside it. The EU must adopt this position if it wishes to have any credibility when demanding that human rights be respected by non-EU countries with which it concludes agreements. In fact, the committee proposes that an item entitled 'Human rights in the European Union' be entered systematically on the agenda for the urgent debates. The committee's views and proposals are summarised below. - Immigration and the right of asylum: the committee deplores the exclusively repressive nature of many EU texts which have been adopted or are currently being drawn up, such as those on family reunions and the definition of a refugee. On the question of regularising the position of illegal immigrants, MEPs call upon all the Member States to follow the example of Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal. - Measures to combat racism and xenophobia: Member States are called upon to adopt or reinforce anti-racist laws by basing them on the principle that 'racism is a crime' whether it involves acts, declarations or the dissemination of slogans; these laws should contain criminal, civil and administrative measures like those already in force in Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK. The Pailler report reiterates the committee's condemnation of all forms of racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism, acts of racist violence and racist discrimination as regards access to employment, vocational training, housing, schooling, health and social services. The committee also wishes to see Parliament's Rules of Procedure modified to empower the President to take action in response to racist remarks made by MEPs during its official meetings. - Economic and social rights: the committee is extremely concerned at the extent of poverty in Europe connected with austerity policies which aggravate unemployment, precarious employment and inequality, despite action taken to combat poverty at national and Community level. - Equal rights and non-discrimination: The inclusion in Community instruments of non-discrimination clauses banning discrimination based on ethnic origin, sex, colour, religion, national origin and sexual orientation is welcomed. However, the committee stresses the need to ensure respect for all minorities. It therefore calls on the Member States to recognize the specific situation of Sinti and Roma and demands that all local authorities provide special centres for non-sedentary population groups. On abortion, the committee deplores the fact that in Ireland the law bans all information or expression of opinion in favour of the voluntary termination of pregnancy. Ms Pailler is also alarmed at the militancy of anti-abortion activists in France. - The situation of prisoners: MEPs are concerned at the ill-treatment, and even torture, still inflicted on prisoners and people under arrest, despite the ratification by all the Member States of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. - Freedom of information, expression and creation: the committee believes that the right of everyone to freedom of expression, of which freedom of the press and the right to information are integral parts, must be reaffirmed. - Individual rights: Member States are reminded of their obligation to respect the right of defence during trials. Lastly, the committee notes the measures taken by Greece to free conscientious objectors and to adopt legislation which recognizes the right of conscientious objection, but calls on it to go further as the committee considers that certain measures remain inadequate or discriminatory.