Respect for human rights in the European Union in 1997

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The Committee on Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs has adopted the report by Anne-Marie SCHAFFNER (UFE, F) on respect for human rights in the EU in 1997. The committee restated its view that the Member States must ensure that fundamental rights were genuinely respected, since the credibility and consistency of the EU's action on this issue in its external policies was at stake. Respect for human rights is seen as an essential aspect of any democratic society and should be one of the fundamental pillars of the Union's domestic and foreign policy. The committee, in deference to the human rights violations perpetrated against women, called on the Commission to designate 1999 'European Year to Stop Violence Against Women' and condemned the practice of sexual mutilation of women.MEPs voiced concern at the discrimination and occasional full-blown persecution to which new religious movements and minority religions were subject in certain Member States. However, it considered it essential to comabt the attacks on personal rights perpetrated by certain cults or sects. It stressed that the right to respect for private and family life, residence and correspondence, as well as the protection of personal data, were fundamental rights which States must uphold and that any optical or computerised surveillance measures must be subject to the strictest possible respect for such rights and without exception include judicial guarantees. MEPs fully recognised conscientious objection with, as a corollary, the requirement to carry out an alternative civilian service under comparable conditions to those applicable to military service. They welcomed the fact that Greece had passed a law recognising the right to conscientious objection. The committee called on the Member States to adopt and implement, in close collaboration with humanitarian organisations, laws to prevent and combat exclusion, particularly access to the labour market, health care, social security, housing, education and the courts. The report welcomed the fact the UK had signed the Community's 1989 Charter of Fundamental Social Rights and also called for all the Member States to comply with the Council of Europe's Social Charter on which the Community's charter was based.The draft Treaty of Amsterdam includes provisions making it possible to combat all forms of discrimination based on sex, race, nationality, ethnic origin, language, religion or belief, or sexual orientation. The committee recalled that no-one should suffer prejudice or discrimination. Examples: there should be no discrimination against homosexuals; women should enjoy equal treatment and equal opportunities, including genuine participation in public life; actions by anti-abortion "commandos" should be severely punished; abortion should not be criminalised; and an individual's genetic data should only be transmitted to a third party with the prior, informed and written consent of that individual. The committee called for better integration of foreign citizens in the EU; it wants the Member States to grant the right to vote and stand for election to immigrants at local elections under certain conditions. The report says that Member States should recognise full-blown 'jus soli' from birth as regards the acquisition of nationality, and should accept dual nationality. Lastly, the committee deplores the fact that in the European Union there are cases of torture, rape and inhuman, cruel and degrading treatment inflicted by the police or prison personnel on persons under arrest or held in custody, particularly when they are being held under 'forty-eight hour arrest'. It stresses the racist nature of many of these acts.