Migration and asylum policy: European strategy and the Union's future policy

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The strategy paper on the European Union's migration and asylum policy which the Austrian presidency issued last year, originally caused something of a stir. In the meantime, a high level group has started studying a concept for a common and consistent European approach to asylum and migration. The Committee welcomed the debate which has been launched by the Austrian presidency, but felt that a clear distinction should be made between asylum, migrant labour, action to combat illegal immigration and the position of legitimate immigrants. In a report drawn up by Viviane REDING (EPP, L) it also emphasised the need to seek a balance between the human dimension of migration and legal measures designed to regulate migratory movements. Once the Treaty of Amsterdam comes into effect, policies on migration, asylum and the crossing of external borders will become a matter of Community competence. This means that the Commission has the right of legislative initiative. The committee therefore called on the Council to respect the Community logic and take full account of Commission proposals, while involving the European Parliament in the legislative procedure. However, the Commission should be supplied with adequate numbers of qualified staff to be able to perform the tasks assigned to it. On asylum, the civil liberties committee stressed that the right to request asylum is a fundamental right. All member states are required to comply with the Geneva Convention, from which no European agreement must detract. The committee proposed the harmonisation of minimum standards of services and reception facilities for asylum seekers, thus ending the current situation in which some countries are more in demand than others due to the disparities between standards. The procedures for asylum applications should be streamlined, with a view to making them more transparent and speedy, while guaranteeing a means of appeal. The committee reaffirmed the principle that asylum seekers should not be expelled or returned until their right to appeal has been exhausted. MEPs rejected the proposal in the strategy paper to replace the granting of refugee status on the basis of individual applications and of the Geneva Convention criteria by a system of 'offers' which is to be left to the discretion of each government. Nevertheless, it felt that in the event of a mass influx of refugees member states must have the possibility of putting the system of individual protection on hold and giving institutional guarantees for a specific period. MEPs called on the Council to reach consensus quickly on the question of the distribution of refugees and sharing the burden imposed by massive and sudden influxes of refugees into those Member States which accept them either for geographical reasons or for historical reasons. Finally, the civil liberties committee felt that the European Union and the member states should help legitimate immigrants to integrate into the host country's society, noting that they make a significant contribution to Europe's social and economic life. It strongly condemned the criminal activities of illegal immigration networks, however.