Improving safety at sea

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The Temporary Committee on Improving Safety at Sea adopted the report by Dirk STERCKX (ELDR, B) setting out its final conclusions. The Committee was set up in the wake of the disaster of the oil tanker Prestige, which sank off the Galician coast on 19 November 2002, to investigate this incident and other disasters at sea, including the wreck of the Erika off the coast of Brittany on 12 December 1999. It held three public hearings with maritime experts as well as talks with the European Commission, the Irish Presidency, Spanish government representatives and the Spanish government commissioner responsible for the Prestige case. MEPs also conducted an interview with Prestige captain Apostoulos Mangouras, who was not being allowed to leave Spain pending his trial. In its conclusions, the committee condemned the decision to tow the vessel away from the coast and the Spanish authorities' statement that they would take the same action again. Although the sealing operation to stop oil leaking from the wreck of the Prestige and the specific plans for making the wreck safe were welcomed, the committee called on the competent authorities to continue their efforts to tackle the problem of the oil still present in the sea and the thousands of tonnes of waste in landfills. MEPs said the authorities should put forward a detailed calendar for the extraction and the treatment of the waste. They also urged that the expertise gained in the process be made widely available and used in tackling any further accidents. And they queried the amount of heavy oil still left in Galician waters after the disaster. The committee called on the Spanish judicial authorities to allow Captain Mangouras to return to his country pending his trial, to relax the requirement that he report daily to the authorities and to clarify as soon as possible the starting date and timetable for the legal case against him. Among other recommendations, the committee called on Member States to set up a European coastguard service with the powers to ensure: - maritime safety and the protection of the marine environment (including fisheries, piracy, maritime crime and terrorism); - the strict monitoring of adherence to certain shipping routes and the prosecution of the illegal entry of vessels; - swift coordination of measures in the event of an accident at sea, including the assignment of emergency moorings and ports. Further recommendations by the committee included a call for more powers for the European Agency for Maritime Safety, improved working conditions and safety for seafarers and better protection of the Baltic waters, given that many Russian oil tankers do not meet EU safety standards. MEPs also proposed equipping dangerous goods containers with electronic transponders, as these containers could then be easily found in a sunken vessel.