European Union and the external dimension of human rights policy: from Rome to Maastricht beyond

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OBJECTIVE: this communication outlines a global European strategy to incorporate human rights in the Union's international relations. It consists of two sections: . a summary of the action taken by the Community in this area, . an overview of the strategies to be implemented with a view to improving the consistency and visibility of the EC's action. SUBSTANCE: as regards the assessment of the EU's commitment within the international community: the Commission emphasises that the Union makes a significant contribution to the work carried out within international bodies (UN, OSCE), particularly in terms of standards and strengthening the mechanisms for the protection of human rights. The Community's own action is based on a series of international acts (United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and is aimed at providing aid for and promoting human rights throughout the world (supporting democratisation, encouraging and enhancing the rule of law, promoting civil society and the independence of the media, providing support for education, raising awareness of human rights, encouraging equal opportunities, protecting the most vulnerable sections of society, refugees and minorities, and so on). To implement these measures, the Community possesses the following instruments: - relations with third countries, particularly agreements between the EC and third countries which include clauses on respect for human rights, with accompanying clauses to cover non-respect; - technical and financial assistance from the EU to third countries, which includes explicit references to human rights; - financial resources: lines in the Community budget concerning the promotion of human rights and democracy together with other resources taken from the appropriations set aside for technical and financial assistance for actions in this field. The Commission hopes to continue its action in this direction by urging the Member States and the Council to make aid dependent not only on respect for human rights, but also on the promotion of fundamental social rights (the fight against forced labour and the exploitation of children, the freedom to join trade unions and the right to collective bargaining) in line with what was agreed for the GSP (additional trade preferences for countries respecting ILO agreements). As regards future prospects: the Commission plans to continue its action in this field in a non-discriminatory and transparent manner by increasing the visibility of its action and improving the instruments available. This improvement would involve the following elements: - contractual relations with third countries, particularly the definition of the criteria which must be met when establishing contractual relations with these countries and the assessment of efforts made in this direction (which means that an agreement could only be concluded if the country involved had demonstrated that it was firmly committed to a process of democratisation). Subsequently, continued dialogue with the country concerned would enable common agreement to be reached on the definition of a partnership programme benefiting human rights and democracy; - financial resources: to ensure optimum use of the various financial instruments concerning human rights, the Commission hopes that the funds will be: . more flexible with a view to making them compatible with the specific objectives being pursued, in particular to ensure that financial resources are available at short notice in cases of emergency and that they are adapted to the specific requirements of human rights, .complementary (technical assistance, funds for development cooperation, specific lines concerning human rights) so as to prevent overlaps and to promote continuity; .more available, so as to provide for sums acting as incentives which are to be granted in accordance with efforts to establish democracy, . more transparent. In parallel, cooperation and dialogue should be stepped up with the various national, regional and international partners in order to: . provide support for the various mechanisms used to monitor respect for human rights and for the bodies working to promote human rights, . encourage medium and long-term programming for priority activities to be implemented jointly, . improve the exchange of information on activities under way and research on the issues involved.