Sea pollution: Prestige accident, improving safety at sea

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As requested by the European Parliament on 19 December 2002, this Report constitutes the Commission's response concerning action to deal with the effects of the Prestige disaster. As far as the accident itself is concerned, the Commission would point out that the research carried out into the causes are by no means completed. The authorities responsible for the investigations still intend to carry out many additional analyses. Consequently, the Commission can only give a partial view of the situation at a particular moment in time. Be that as it may, this Report is intended to give the European Parliament the most complete possible overview of the current state of information available on the Prestige accident. The Prestige tragedy, whatever its causes, has resulted in an unprecedented environmental disaster, in terms of the length of the coastline affected in both Spain and France. The fishing and tourism sectors have also been seriously hit. In addition the pollution caused by the Prestige has proved particularly difficult to deal with, both on account of the nature of the heavy fuel oil concerned and the great depths at which the wreck of the vessel is lying, a new situation which calls for innovative technical responses. However, above and beyond the precise cause of the accident and the management of the pollution, the Prestige tragedy confirms the validity of the position taken by the Commission, namely that it is essential and urgent to address the relevant questions with regard to maritime safety at the level of the EU and at international level. The problems raised by such accidents can no longer be resolved at a purely national level. In this context, it is essential that the measures proposed following the Erika and Prestige accidents are rapidly transposed by the Member States into their national legislation and in practice. Thus, broadening the scope of application of the European Maritime Safety Agency to include the management of anti-pollution resources, the prohibition of the transport of heavy fuel oil in single-hull oil tankers and the speeding-up of the timetable for the phasing-out of such vessels, the establishment of plans for places of refuge, the strengthening of controls in ports and the imposition of dissuasive criminal sanctions for those responsible for pollution constitute the European response that is needed in the face of the challenges posed by these disasters. However, the EU cannot content itself with proposing regional solutions. It is clear that, in the light of the Prestige accident, the international framework itself is no longer attuned to the new maritime transport conditions and the increased risks encountered by coastal States. Quite rightly, in the face of the dramatic consequences of the oil spills which continue to occur along our coasts, European citizens find it increasingly difficult to accept the traditional arguments about freedom of navigation as a justification for the impotence of States vis-à-vis substandard ships or ships carrying particularly polluting merchandise. To the Commission's way of thinking, it is now urgent to revise the international law of the sea in order to ensure greater protection for coastal States confronted with risks that are unacceptable for their environment, their citizens and theireconomies. Consequently, the Commission hopes to obtain strong and clear support from the European Parliament and the Member States in the efforts which it intends to deploy as soon as possible with a view to launching the major project of revising the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.