

Annual report on human rights in the world 2006 and the EU's policy on this matter

2007/2020(INI) - 27/03/2007

The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Simon COVENEY (EPP-ED, IE) on the EU's 2006 Annual Report on Human Rights. It singled out a number of countries for particular criticism, including China, Iran, Russia and Sudan.

The committee said that China's human rights record was still a matter of "serious concern" and should thus "receive more focus in the build-up to the Beijing Olympic games". MEPs urged the Council and Commission to raise the issue of Tibet in talks with the Beijing government, and added that the EU's trade relations with Beijing should be contingent upon human rights reform.

Expressing its "deep concern regarding the deterioration of the human rights situation" in Iran, the committee "calls on the Council to express concern [...] in all its contacts with the Iranian government". It also called on the Commission to use the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) to promote cooperation with Iranian civil society.

The report strongly criticised the Russian government, regretting that the EU had had only "limited success" in bringing about policy change as a result of raising difficult issues - such as the situation in Chechnya, the treatment of human rights defenders, and freedom of expression. It expressed concern at legislation limiting the activities of NGOs. The committee was "appalled" at the murder of Anna Politkovskaya and said that Russia should take further measures "to protect freedom of expression and the security of journalists". It also expressed concern about allegations surrounding the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the mistreatment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in prison. The Commission and Council were urged to raise such cases with the Russian authorities at the highest level and in the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia.

On Darfur, the report regretted the fact that the EU had not taken more unilateral action regarding the crisis and had not tried harder to persuade the Sudanese government to accept an international peacekeeping force. It urged the EU to back an international peacekeeping force and the enforcement of the no-fly zone over Darfur. It said that the Council should agree "a plan of specific, targeted sanctions to be imposed on the Khartoum regime [...] in the event of non-compliance with the demands of the international community."

Among other points, the report also recognised attempts to set up a human rights dialogue with Uzbekistan, but said that such a dialogue should not automatically "lead to the lifting of sanctions [...] if no progress is made in the area of human rights and democracy". It also expressed concern about the "limited progress" on human rights issues in Turkey and encouraged the Ankara government to change Article 301 of the country's Penal Code, which limits freedom of expression in the media.

MEPs called for the adoption of "more effective and targeted sanctions" against the government of Myanmar in the light of the deteriorating human rights situation in the country. They also proposed the "expansion of the temporary international mechanism and a continuing proactive search for a satisfactory context for a resumption of direct aid" to the Palestinian territories.

Other countries were also put in the spotlight in the committee's report. The Commission was urged to "review its policy tools vis-à-vis Libya" in view of Tripoli's failure to ensure a fair trial for five Bulgarian nurses and one Palestinian doctor accused of intentionally infecting children with the AIDS virus. The

Council and Commission should urge the US government to "find a mechanism that will facilitate the charging or releasing of detainees in accordance with international law". They should also express "strong disapproval" of US efforts "to actively prevent other countries from ratifying" the Rome Statute of the ICC. The Czech Republic, "as the only remaining EU Member State not to have ratified the Statute", was urged to do so without delay.

The report was also critical of some EU activity in the area of human rights. It asked the Council to explain "how it was possible for Belarus to be elected onto the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in June 2005" – this, in spite of the fact that "four major EU countries are permanent members of that Governing Body." It also noted "with total stupefaction" the provisional suspension by ECHO of humanitarian aid for Iraq, despite "the disastrous situation afflicting the suffering Iraqi people and Iraqi refugees."

On immigration, the committee noted that the Union, in its texts, attempts "to link immigration and development and ensure that the fundamental rights of immigrants are respected". However, "the reality on the ground gives the lie to those texts": readmission agreements are being concluded with third countries that do not have the legal and institutional machinery needed in order to handle the readmission of nationals and protect their rights.

MEPs noted that although the new United Nations Human Rights Council "has the potential to develop into a valuable framework for the EU's multilateral human rights efforts", it had proved to be ineffectual in responding appropriately to human rights crises due to "the use of the UNHRC by many states as a forum for political pressure instead of the promotion of human rights". The Member States were urged not to support countries which have been shown to commit "gross and systematic" human rights violations as candidates for high-ranking positions in international forums.

The report also included a series of recommendations to the Council and Commission. It urged both institutions to raise the situation of human rights defenders systematically in all political dialogues. EU missions should "reach out to local human rights defenders in a more proactive manner", and the Council was urged "to inform Parliament systematically about the implementation of the guidelines on the ground and to involve it fully in the process of evaluating them". The committee said that the idea of issuing visas for human rights defenders in grave danger, as recommended by the Council, should be "an important priority". Lastly, future Council presidencies were asked to report back to Parliament on how its concerns, as expressed in its resolutions, have been taken into account.