Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire

COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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Europe's response to humanitarian disasters

Motion for a resolution
presented by Mrs de Zulueta and others

This motion has not been discussed in the Assembly and commits only the members who have signed it

The large number of natural disasters in 2005 has exacted a heavy cost in terms of the damage suffered: the tsunami in South East Asia, hurricane Katrina in America and the earthquake in South Asia. These human tragedies, which have caused the death of hundreds of thousands of people, have shocked the world, causing consternation and sadness at the same time as a dreadful feeling of powerlessness. They have also given rise to unprecedented international solidarity and generosity and spotlighted the difficulties and challenges of the large-scale distribution of humanitarian aid involving many different agencies.

Europe alone represents some 70% of both material and financial international humanitarian aid. The scale of the disasters and the experience of dealing with them have highlighted the need for a wider analysis of Europe's capacity to respond and of its responsibilities in the face of humanitarian disasters both in Europe and elsewhere.

In Resolution 1422 on Europe and the tsunami disaster the Parliamentary Assembly made an initial assessment of where Europe's responsibility lies in humanitarian disasters. It is now time to take stock of the actual assistance provided by Europe in the wake of these disasters and of persisting needs, and to consider what steps need to be taken to respond rapidly and effectively to future disasters.

The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) plays a key role in managing crises and co-ordinating humanitarian aid and assistance on the ground for the populations affected by these disasters.

In a recently published report[1], the OCHA pointed out that it was necessary to reform the current international humanitarian system and drew special attention to the need to improve the forecasting capacity of humanitarian agencies in various key areas. The main recommendations concern the need to increase technical and logistical capacity, improve international co-ordination and performance and, finally, set up a more reliable system for long-term funding of emergency action.

The main challenges encountered by humanitarian agencies result from the lack of capacity to respond to the essential needs of the most vulnerable populations in critical areas such as access to healthcare, distribution of urgently required materials aid and water supplies. Effective and fully transparent funding is therefore essential to the OCHA policy as it would help to rapidly alleviate the suffering of populations who are increasingly regularly faced with major natural disasters that have disastrous economic consequences for the member states and regions concerned. The plan is therefore to set up a 500 million dollar world emergency fund, which could be used by humanitarian agencies when a crisis breaks out in any part of the world.

Steps to improve European countries' capacity to respond to humanitarian disasters must go hand in hand with additional financial and environmental measures to reduce future risks.

[1] In Larger Freedom: Toward Development, Security and Human Rights for All, OCHA, 2005

Emerging countries are more seriously affected by natural disasters than developed countries as the losses caused represent a much larger proportion of their GDP. They also take much longer to recover from such disasters, which often cause major damage to their internal functioning, and the cost in terms of human lives is much higher because of the fragile nature of buildings in developing countries.

In the light of such inequalities, Europe has a major responsibility to help manage natural disasters and European countries must therefore achieve the objective of earmarking 0.7 % of their GDP for public overseas development assistance and even consider whether this figure should not be higher.

There is now a much greater awareness of the importance of preventing and preparing for natural disasters. We must not forget that the cost of natural disasters has steadily risen over the past thirty years, partly because more and more building is taking place in risk areas. In order to reduce vulnerability to natural disasters, we need responsible public policies and the public must be rapidly informed of what needs to be done to reduce risks.

The principle of solidarity between European countries and the developing world is one of the fundamental values of Council of Europe member states. In order to improve Europe's capacity to respond to natural disasters and thus ensure that it fulfils its humanitarian responsibilities, the Assembly recommends that:

- support be given to the activities of the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs in its central role in relief operations,

- a prevention and early warning system be set up in collaboration with the Council of Europe's Partial Agreement on Major Hazards (EUR-OPA) to detect earthquakes and tidal waves and that the populations concerned receive appropriate training and education,

- careful consideration be given to Europe's response to the target of 0.7% of GDP for overseas development assistance and to whether we are doing enough,

- care be taken to ensure transparency in aid programmes,

- donors be urged to honour their pledges,

- consideration be given to the increasingly important role played by the European Commission,

- support be given to civil society's action in response to natural disasters,

- steps be taken to ensure that funds are not withdrawn from less prominent disasters, ie "forgotten emergencies".

Signed [1]:

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EPP/CD: Group of the European People's Party
ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
EDG: European Democratic Group
UEL: Group of the Unified European Left
NR: not registered in a group