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Debate in the European Parliament
Plenary session
"EUROPEAN UNION SOLIDARITY FUND:
OBSTACLES FOR ITS REFORM"

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Introductory remarks

Mr President, I would like to thank the European Parliament, and in particular the members of the Committee on Regional Development for their continued interest in, and support for the Solidarity Fund. It is **an important instrument to promote the European Union's strategic objective of solidarity.**

- **Since its creation in 2002, 62 applications have been received. The Fund intervened in 33 cases in 20 different countries. The total amount committed so far is €1.523 billion.**
- According to the recent special report by the Court of Auditors, the fund is well managed and delivers quick, efficient and flexible assistance.
- **However, this fund has its limitations.** The **threshold** for mobilising the European Union Solidarity Fund is extremely high. As a result, the fund is not well equipped for certain types of disasters typically involving lower eligible expenditure, such as forest fires and more than two thirds of all applications for the fund

assistance presented so far, were based on an exception for so-called "extraordinary regional disasters".

- Moreover, with all the existing Community instruments it is extremely difficult or indeed impossible for us to react to **man-made disasters**, as illustrated by industrial accidents as the Prestige oil spill, or terrorist acts such as the Madrid bombing of March 2004. Likewise, it is not possible at present to provide assistance from the European Solidarity Fund in the event of a serious public health crisis.
- **For these reasons in April 2005 the Commission adopted a proposal for a revision of the Regulation.** Despite joint efforts with successive presidencies since 2005, the Council has so far not been able to reach agreement on this proposal.
- One reason is that the large majority of Member States consider that the fund works very well under the present scheme and they do not consider it necessary or appropriate to expand it to cover additional situations, fearing in particular the budgetary consequences of such an expansion.
- The Council has not formally specified the positions of each Member State, although the Council opinions are supported by quasi-unanimity. In addition, it was not indicated where areas of compromise could be found in order to reach an agreement on the Commission proposal.
- The Commission remains convinced that revision of the Solidarity Fund Regulation is necessary to increase the Union's capacity to react quickly in case of major disasters which are currently not covered. Therefore, it will adopt a report to take stock of the six

years of implementing the fund and to identify Solidarity Fund limitations and any room for improvement.

- We hope that the report will relaunch discussions in the Council and in the European Parliament on a revision of the current Solidarity Fund Regulation. The Report should be ready towards the end of the first quarter of 2009.
- With regard to civil protection, the Commission has begun to identify gaps in civil protection response resources on the basis of scenarios for major disasters, and assess options to identified gaps. In this context the Commission will explore innovative arrangements with the Member States for reinforcing the overall EU disaster-response capacity in the framework of the pilot project and the preparatory action included in the 2008 budget.
- On the basis of this work, the Commission may propose to fill the gaps through the development of civil protection modules available for deployment at any time or through additional reserve capacities designed to complement national responses to major disasters, including in the area of fighting wild fires.

Concluding remarks

Mr President, I have three explanations to present to you. This is not an emergency aid solidarity fund; it is a fund which is based on reimbursement of specific costs for emergency operations after disasters, allowing for a return to normal living conditions. The commission proposes; Parliament and the Council decide.

Secondly, in the Regulation amendment we propose to enlarge the scope, we propose to lower the threshold and we propose to change the procedure allowing specifically for the advance payment.

Thirdly, the list of my interventions, and those of President Barroso, with seven presidencies is a very long list; it takes practically two pages, the list of all the meetings and letters. None of the seven presidencies, although some of them initially presented positive attitudes, managed to get agreement in the Council for approving the amendment to the Regulation. I refused to withdraw the proposal from the Council, hoping that with the new report that we will produce and adopt as the Commission early next year we will have a new debate which will allow us to go on with amendments; maybe we are now also having new ideas, maybe a broader scope of amendments to this Fund. In that regard, I hope very much that you will be present and participate in this debate and will support the proposal of the Commission.

Briefly on another issue, prevention, we will adopt at the end of this year a communication "Towards a comprehensive new approach to preventing disasters". We have already completed the two exploratory studies, we have also completed consultations and the impact assessment is currently in preparation. Also, cohesion policy – somebody, I think Mr Janowski, suggested involving cohesion policy in prevention actions – has as one of its priorities precisely preventive actions, especially in the area of environment.

That is all, Mr President, I hope that we will continue to work together with a view to getting this Fund amended in such a way that it will be more important and more responsive to the needs of European citizens.