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B7-0039/2009

MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION

to wind up the debate on the statement by the Commission
pursuant to Rule 110(2) of the Rules of Procedure
on forest fires in the summer of 2009

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on behalf of the PPE Group

European Parliament resolution on this summer's natural disasters in southern Europe

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Articles 2, 6 and 174 of the EC Treaty,
- having regard to its resolutions of 19 June 2008 on stepping up the Union's disaster response capacity¹, of 4 September 2007 on natural disasters², of 7 September 2006 on forest fires and floods in Europe³, of 5 September 2002 on floods in Europe⁴, of 14 April 2005 on the drought in Portugal⁵, of 12 May 2005 on the drought in Spain⁶, of 8 September 2005 on natural disasters (fires and floods) in Europe⁷ and its resolutions of 18 May 2006 on natural disasters (forest fires, droughts and floods) – agricultural aspects⁸, regional development aspects⁹ and environmental aspects¹⁰,
- having regard to the recast Council Decision establishing a Community civil protection mechanism, adopted on 8 November 2007¹¹,
- having regard to the Commission proposal for a Regulation establishing a European Union Solidarity Fund (COM(2005)0108) and to Parliament's position of 18 May 2006¹²,
- having regard to the European Court of Auditors Special Report No 3/2008 'The European Union Solidarity Fund: how rapid, efficient and flexible is it?',
- having regard to the Commission Annual Report 2008 on the European Union Solidarity Fund and the Report on the experience gained after six years of applying the new instrument,
- having regard to Directive 2007/60/EC of the European Parliament and the Council on the assessment and management of floods, adopted on 23 October 2007¹³,
- having regard to the Council Decision of 5 March 2007 establishing a Civil Protection

¹ Text Adopted, P6_TA(2008)0304.

² OJ C 187 E, 24.07.2008, p. 55.

³ OJ C 305 E, 14.12.2006, p. 240.

⁴ OJ C 272 E, 13.11.2003, p. 471.

⁵ OJ C 33 E, 9.2.2006, p. 599.

⁶ OJ C 92 E, 20.4.2006, p. 414.

⁷ OJ C 193 E, 17.8.2006, p. 322.

⁸ OJ C 297 E, 7.12.2006, p. 363.

⁹ OJ C 297 E, 7.12.2006, p. 369.

¹⁰ OJ C 297 E, 7.12.2006, p. 375.

¹¹ OJ L 314, 1.12.2007, p. 9.

¹² OJ C 297 E, 7.12.2006, p. 331.

¹³ OJ L 288, 6.11.2007, p. 27.

Financial Instrument (2007/162/EC, Euratom)¹⁴,

- having regard to the conclusions of the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting of 12 and 13 June 2007 on enhancing the coordination capacity of the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) within the Community civil protection mechanism,
 - having regard to Michel Barnier’s report of 9 May 2006 ‘For a European civil protection force: Europe Aid’,
 - having regard to point 12 of the Presidency Conclusions of the Brussels European Council of 15 and 16 June 2006 concerning the Union’s responsiveness to emergencies, crises and disasters,
 - having regard to the Commission Communication on ‘A Community approach on the prevention of natural and man-made disasters’ (COM(2009)82 final/2 of 4 March 2009),
 - having regard to the unanimously adopted resolution of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly on the ‘Civil protection and prevention of natural and ecological disasters in the Euro-Mediterranean region’,
 - having regard to Rule 110(2) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas in 2009 the summer was once again marked by devastating wildfires across southern Europe, causing both human suffering, with at least eleven lives lost, and immense material and environmental damage,
- B. whereas in recent years persistent droughts and high temperatures have led to the proliferation of forest fires in Europe, worsening desertification in many regions and affecting agriculture, stockbreeding and the forest heritage,
- C. whereas drought and persistent fires are speeding up the process of desertification of large areas of southern Europe, with over 400 000 hectares per year of European forest disappearing over the last decade, seriously damaging the quality of life of the populations affected,
- D. whereas over for the coming decades, regardless of our global mitigation efforts, there will be an inevitable increase in global temperature, with especially adverse effects for southern Europe, which is predicted to be an extremely vulnerable region in terms of climate change and which already experienced wildfires of unprecedented magnitude in 2007 as a direct result of the extreme heatwaves of that year,
- E. whereas the frequency, severity, complexity and impact of natural and man-made disasters across Europe has increased rapidly over recent years, resulting in loss of human life and property, with catastrophic short- and long-term effects on the economy of the regions affected, including depletion of the natural and cultural heritage, the destruction of economic and social infrastructure, and damage to the environment (in the case of wildfires, loss of natural habitat and biodiversity, deterioration of the microclimate and

¹⁴ OJ L 71, 10.03.2007 p. 9.

increases in greenhouse gas emissions),

- F. having regard to the damaging economic and social consequences of the natural disasters for regional economies, both in sectors such as tourism and in terms of productive activity in general,
- G. whereas prevention is of significant importance when it comes to protecting against natural, technological and environmental disasters,
- H. whereas the phenomenon of forest fires is also aggravated by the progressive abandonment of the countryside and its traditional activities, inadequate forest maintenance, the existence of large expanses of forest consisting of a single tree species, the planting of unsuitable tree varieties, the absence of a proper prevention policy and insufficiently severe penalties where fires are started deliberately,
- I. whereas the Community Mechanism for Civil Protection has been repeatedly activated in the last few years,
- J. whereas natural disasters such as the increasingly frequent forest fires in southern Europe can have also a cross-border dimension owing to the speed with which they can spread from their original source and their ability to change direction unexpectedly, so that they require flexible, rapid and coordinated response efforts; having regard also to the extensive damage they can cause to property, human life, economic activities and the regional environment,
- K. whereas Parliament has repeatedly urged the Council Presidencies to reach a decision on a new Solidarity Fund Regulation since the adoption of its position in May 2006,
- L. whereas, since its creation in 2002, the Solidarity Fund has provided financial support totalling more than EUR 1.5 billion,
- M. whereas the Court of Auditors states that the Solidarity Fund ‘has achieved its underlying objective, which is to demonstrate solidarity with Member States in disaster situations’, although the most important problem remains the lack of rapidity with which the Fund can be activated as a crisis management instrument,
- N. whereas the Commission acknowledges the need to improve the transparency and simplicity of the criteria governing the mobilisation of the Solidarity Fund,
- O. whereas the European Parliament has submitted successive resolutions since 1995 calling urgently for various European Union initiatives to combat wildfires in southern Europe, which were either not implemented or left incomplete and ineffective,
 - 1. Expresses its sympathy and deep solidarity with the relatives of those who lost their lives and with residents of the affected areas, and pays homage to the fire-fighters, both professionals and volunteers, who have worked tirelessly and courageously to extinguish fires, rescue people and limit damage from this summer’s natural disasters;
 - 2. Takes the view that the Commission should submit a proposal for a European strategy to

combat natural disasters, including a compulsory approach to risk prevention, and devise a protocol for standardised action for each type of disaster throughout the Union; also takes the view that this strategy should devote particular attention to island and outlying regions with low geographic density;

3. Calls on the Commission to mobilise the current EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF) in the most flexible manner possible and without any delay in order to assist the victims of this summer's natural disasters;
4. Urges the Commission to support rehabilitation of the regions which have suffered heavy damage, restore the productive potential in affected areas, seek to relaunch job creation and take appropriate measures to compensate for the social costs inherent in the loss of jobs and other sources of income;
5. Considers that recent experience emphasises the need further to reinforce the Community's civil protection/prevention preparedness and response capability in connection with forest fires and other wildfires in southern Europe, and strongly urges the Commission to take action towards this end in order to provide visible expression of European solidarity with countries affected by major emergencies;
6. Recognises the contribution of the Monitoring Information Centre in supporting and facilitating the mobilisation and coordination of civil protection assistance during emergencies;
7. Emphasises the individual responsibility of the Member States for civil protection and disaster control measures, calls for stricter punishment of arsonists, more efficient methods for the early detection of forest fires, and better transfer of expertise on fire suppression measures among the Member States, and urges the Commission to improve the exchange of experience among the regions and Member States;
8. Acknowledges the solidarity of the European Union, its Member States and other countries in assisting the affected regions during forest fire emergencies with the supply of aircraft, fire-fighting equipment and expertise, as well as the commendable help given to the relevant authorities and rescue teams; takes the view that the scale and impact of these phenomena frequently go beyond regional and national levels and capabilities, and calls for an effective European commitment as a matter of urgency;
9. Welcomes the contribution of the European tactical reserve of fire-fighting aircraft (EUFFTR), which was established this summer to assist Member States facing major fires; notes that this pilot project was established with the support of the European Parliament in order to step up cooperation between Member States on combating forest fires, and proved to be an excellent example of enhanced capacity at European level providing immediate help in emergency situations; emphasises, in this context, the need to continue the development and reinforcement of this pilot project as we continue to experience circumstances where great devastation occurs because the capacity of Member States and the EUFFTR prove inadequate;
10. Emphasises the great urgency of this issue is and calls in consequence for the creation of an effective European force that could react immediately in emergencies, as proposed in

the Barnier report;

11. Takes the view that a new European Union Solidarity Fund Regulation is essential as a means of addressing the problems caused by natural disasters in a more flexible and effective way; criticises the fact that the Council blocked progress on this, unlawfully delaying the revision, although Parliament adopted its position by an overwhelming majority at first reading in May 2006;
12. Emphasises the fact that reviving this initiative could generate major benefits for the practical operation of the Fund, widening its scope, abolishing the exceptional activation of the Fund for regional disasters, allowing more regions to receive assistance by the introduction of a lower damage threshold for mobilising it and, very importantly, allowing a faster disaster response by speeding up the payments;
13. Strongly urges the Commission and Council to exercise maximum responsibility and speed in seeking a compromise in order to reactivate the process of revision of the Solidarity Fund Regulation with a view to creating a stronger and more rapid instrument, able to respond to the new globalisation and climate change challenges; calls on the Swedish Presidency in office, as well as the EU Ministers for Finance, Environment, Agriculture and Regional Development, to take swift and firm action without delay;
14. Stresses the need to enhance prevention measures designed to tackle all types of natural disaster by establishing joint strategic guidelines to ensure better coordination among the Member States, as well as greater operability and coordination among the various Community instruments (Structural Funds, Solidarity Fund, EAFRD, LIFE+ and the mechanism of the rapid response and preparedness instrument for major emergencies), not forgetting the need to involve other existing instruments, such as State aid for regional purposes and EIB loans, with the aim of remedying the damage caused by natural disasters;
15. Asks for regional coordination mechanisms to be introduced into rural development programmes in order to enhance the efficiency of prevention measures;
16. Stresses the need to speed up the procedure for accessing EU funds for the recovery of agricultural land following floods and fires, and for more financial aid to be made available for the development of firebreaks and flood defences; stresses the fatal effects of forest fires and floods on animals and livestock;
17. Considers it essential to take into account the structural problems of the rural environment (demographic decline, abandonment of farmland, deforestation and the excessive fragmentation of woodland ownership);
18. Takes the view that the existing links between civil protection and environmental policies should be reinforced in order to take full advantage of the preventive measures included in environmental legislation and ensure a coordinated EU approach to disaster prevention and mitigation; emphasises, however, that there are no plans whatsoever to replace or weaken existing national competencies in civil protection and disaster prevention through EU guidelines;

19. Urges the Commission, in its proposal for an EU action plan for adapting to climate change, to prioritise the prevention and combating of droughts and forest fires in southern Europe;
20. Calls on the Commission to make progress in devising information and education campaigns on the prevention measures agreed with the Member States in order to reduce the risks and consequences of natural disasters, especially in the areas of highest risk, by making the public aware of the need to care for the environment and conserve natural resources;
21. Calls on the Commission to undertake an in-depth reflexion on the introduction of a Common Forest Policy to deal more effectively with climate change and natural disasters;
22. Calls on the Commission to introduce, among the agri-environmental measures provided for under the CAP, specific interventions designed to prevent and avoid the spread of forest fires;
23. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the governments of the Member States and the regional authorities affected by the fires and floods.