Human rights in the world and EU fundamental rights
Speech by The Rt Hon Chris Patten, CH
European Parliament - Plenary Session, Strasbourg, 4 July 2001 - Check against delivery

Mr President, may I start by commending Mr Wuori for a challenging and focussed report, which has attracted overwhelming support from this Parliament. I also enjoyed listening to the minister's speech: Parliament knows his personal commitment to the enhancement and protection of human rights. The year since Parliament's last report on human rights has been punctuated with important institutional and policy developments. The reform of external aid has taken root and Europe Aid is tackling the avalanche of responses to the two recent calls for proposals on human rights, some 1 400 proposals for a total of EUR 1.6 billion. The Charter of Fundamental Rights has been solemnly proclaimed and it is an important element in the European Union's efforts to ensure coherence between internal and external human rights policy. The adoption by the Council of guidelines on torture has provided a clear framework for policy and action in that area and the communication on human rights and democratisation, which was long in gestation, was adopted on 8 May and it sets out a clear strategy for the short term and the medium term. We now have to focus on the implementation of its proposals.

It is evident from Mr Wuori's report that Parliament and Commission are thinking along similar lines when it comes to human rights. This is my first opportunity to present the communication to Parliament in a plenary session. Boiled down to its essence, the communication seeks to promote coherent and consistent human rights policies in the European Union's relations with third countries, to maximise the leverage afforded by political dialogue, trade and external assistance, and to set out a more strategic and focussed approach for the European initiative, for democracy and human rights.

Several issues raised in Mr Wuori's report dovetail with points in our communication. For example, we make clear that Parliament will be consulted on the programming of the European initiative for democracy and human rights for 2002 and the years beyond. On reporting and evaluation, the Commission is committed to publishing regular reports on the activities that we fund.

The promotion of human rights is, as the honourable Member's report makes clear, an indispensable element in the prevention of conflict. The communication on conflict prevention issued in April confirms the high priority given by the Commission to developing the Union's capacities. More systematic use of strategy papers will help to ensure the cogent use of Community instruments to address both the root causes of conflict and other human rights problems. As regards the rapid reaction mechanism, the Commission will provide Parliament in due course with an evaluation of activities undertaken.

The central theme of the honourable Member's report, freedom of expression, finds an echo in the communication, which makes clear that this will fall under the first of the four priority areas for the
European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights Programme for 2002 and beyond, and that theme is indeed of pivotal importance. The right to express one's opinions without fear or consequence is to borrow a phrase from the great English judge Lord Devlin, 'A lamp that shows that freedom lives.' When state authorities start to close down newspapers, when they start to harass or imprison journalists, it is a sure sign that human rights and freedom are crumbling.

The European Union makes its views plain on this subject in its contacts with third countries, and in international fora such as the UN Commission on Human Rights. Moreover, the rhetoric is matched with hard support. Under the European initiative alone, over EUR 5.4 million was allocated in 2002 to projects in support of freedom of expression, free media and the protection and training of journalists. A large project in Africa and Asia undertaken by 'Rapporteurs Sans Frontières', offers a good example. Fact-finding on imprisoned journalists, and the provision of practical assistance to journalists and their families, is coupled with education and media campaigns.

I would like to look now at another thread running through the honourable Member's report, the relationship between our two institutions. Parliament has cultivated a high profile with respect to human rights. As I mentioned when I presented the communication to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human rights, Common Security and Defence Policy on 15 May, the reports and resolutions of Parliament on the Commission's previous performance on human rights were of great use in drawing up the communication. The Commission is keen to reinforce its dialogue on human rights with Parliament, and this is reflected in the consultations which will take place on programming the European initiative in 2002. In cooperation with the presidency, the Commission would also seek to ensure that the timing and location of the human rights discussion forum with non-governmental organisations, and with others, takes full account of the need for systematic participation by Members of this House. Moreover, we want to enhance the potential of the forum. We will begin by evaluating the events held so far, in consultation with Parliament, the Council and NGOs.

I congratulate the honourable Member once again on the excellent report and look forward to working with him and with the House in taking forward our shared concern in human rights.