



Human rights: political rights abuses in Venezuela, massacres in Congo, oppression in Burma

In three resolutions on democracy and human rights adopted at the end of this week's Strasbourg plenary session, the European Parliament condemns the use of intimidation and electoral manipulation in the run-up to elections in Venezuela, voices dismay at the renewed fighting in eastern Congo and calls on ASEM states at their summit this week to press the Burmese regime to release all political prisoners.

Intimidation of opposition candidates in Venezuela

In the run-up to Venezuela's regional and local elections in November 2008, Parliament, in a resolution adopted by 51 votes to 1, "expresses concern about the list of electoral disqualifications" issued by the authorities, pointing to a "long series of measures taken by the government with a view to intimidating opposition members, dissidents and international observers in the country".

These measures include lists of citizens, known as the Tascón list, Maisanta list and Russian list, to "deprive citizens of their right to hold public office and of access to administrative services and procedures". The political use of such lists "is restricting the civil and political rights of opponents of the current Venezuelan Government", say MEPs.

The resolution also condemns the murder of Mr Julio Soto, the student leader of the Copei party and President of the Students Union at Zulia State University. Parliament calls on the Venezuelan authorities to "clear up" this crime, which was "committed under strange circumstances" and to bring the perpetrators and those responsible to justice.

Expulsion of Human Rights Watch is a "serious precedent"

The EP regards the recent expulsion of two senior officials of Human Rights Watch, Mr José Miguel Vivanco and Mr Daniel Wilkinson, as "an extremely serious precedent as regards respect for freedom of expression and the right to criticise".

The resolution concludes by demanding that the Chávez government "put an end to all such practices and foster a more participative democracy in Venezuela, in full compliance with the principles laid down in the 1999 constitution".

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Renewed fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Parliament is "extremely concerned" about the renewed fighting between the Congolese Army and resurgent militias in North Kivu and the previously pacified region of Ituri, and expresses its "deep outrage at the massacres, crimes against humanity and acts of sexual violence against women and girls which have been continuing for too many years in the eastern provinces of the DRC".

In spite of the Goma peace accord signed on 23 January 2008 between the Congolese Government and 22 armed groups, there have since been "massacres, rapes of young girls, mothers and grandmothers, forced recruitments of civilians and child soldiers and a host of other acts of violence and serious human rights abuses in the eastern DRC". According to UNHCR reports, the renewed fighting in North Kivu and Ituri has led to a high number of casualties and more than 150,000 displaced persons.

Overall, the conflict affecting the DRC has claimed the lives of 5 400 000 people since 1998 and is still causing, either directly or indirectly, approximately 1500 deaths each day.

The EP demands that the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP - National Congress for the Defence of the People) returns "immediately and unconditionally to the peace process to which it committed itself in Goma in January 2008".

Condemning the use of rape as a weapon of war, the EP stresses the importance of "access to health services in conflict situations and refugee camps".

Call for urgent measures by the international community

Parliament calls on the international community and the UN Security Council "as a matter of urgency" to "take all measures capable of genuinely preventing any further attacks on the civilian population of the eastern provinces of the DRC" and to strengthen MONUC, the largest UN peacekeeping mission, "by providing appropriate materials and staff to enable it to fulfil its mandate".

Parliament also urges that the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court investigate atrocity crimes committed in the Kivus and Ituri since June 2003.

EU action

Turning to measures the EU might take, the resolution calls on the Council and every EU Member State to provide special aid to the populations of the eastern DRC, and asks that the Council and Commission "implement with immediate effect large-scale medical assistance and reintegration programmes for the civilian populations in the eastern DRC".

It also asks for the effective establishment of monitoring mechanisms, such as the Kimberley process for the certification of the origin of natural resources imported into the EU market.

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Torture of political dissidents and ethnic cleansing in Burma

In the resolution on Burma adopted unanimously (68 votes in favour), MEPs demand that the military government of Burma immediately release all political prisoners and put an end to the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for more than 13 years. They also call on the ASEM states, meeting at their summit on 24 and 25 October, to press the Burmese authorities on these matters.

The resolutions says that this coming 24 October 2008 "marks the 13th anniversary of the unjust incarceration as a political prisoner of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, General Secretary of the National League for Democracy" and that "an additional 2120 individuals continue to face imprisonment in atrocious conditions merely for expressing the wish to bring democracy to Burma".

ASEM urged to appeal to Burmese authorities

Press release

One day before the 13th anniversary of Aung San Suu Kyi's captivity, Parliament insists on her immediate release, and urges ASEM states (leaders of European and Asian countries will convene at the ASEM Summit meeting in China on 24 and 25 October 2008) "to jointly appeal to the Burmese military authorities to release all political prisoners".

The EP also condemns the "arbitrary charges behind the arrests of many dissidents and "the widespread use of torture and hard labour". It demands that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) be allowed to resume visits in light of the "systematic denial of medical treatment to political prisoners". In the aftermath of the Saffron Revolution of September 2007, the number of political prisoners has increased from 1300 to 2000.

Ethnic cleansing

Parliament strongly condemns the ethnic cleansing directed against the Karen minority, including those seeking refuge in neighbouring Thailand, and calls on the international community to "exert stronger pressure on the junta to stop military actions against civilians and to increase humanitarian assistance to affected populations".

Proposed action by EU Commission and Council

With respect to the United Nations' admission that "a percentage of all humanitarian aid remitted to Burma is falling victim to state-sponsored exchange rate abuse", the EP calls on the Commission to explain "what action it intends to take".

Lastly, the resolution calls on the EU Council to use its meeting on 11-12 December 2008 to review Council Regulation 194/2008 of 25 February 2008 renewing and strengthening the restrictive measures in respect of Burma, "to broaden targeted sanctions to include access to international banking services for companies, conglomerates and businesses owned by or closely linked to the Burmese military, to halt all imports of Burmese manufactured clothing, and to terminate access by selected generals and their families to business opportunities, health care, consumer purchases, and foreign education".

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