



MEPs allowed scrutiny of ACP aid plans

The European Parliament will be allowed to scrutinise EU aid plans for the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) bloc, Germany's EU presidency has announced.

With aid to the 78-nation ACP grouping mainly covered by the European Development Fund – which is separate from the EU's budget – MEPs have long complained that they are unable to hold its expenditure to account.

But Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, the German minister for economic cooperation and development, promised last week that country strategy papers for the ACP will be subject to the same procedures as the Union's new Development Cooperation Instrument. The DCI – covering Asia, Latin America, South Africa and a set of countries bordering the EU – requires that MEPs be consulted about aid plans for each country concerned.

Speaking to the Parliament's development committee last week (30 January), Wieczorek-Zeul also promised that the fight against poverty will be a clear component of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) which the European Commission is negotiating with ACP governments. The Commission's tactics in the talks have been severely criticised by anti-poverty activists and ACP ministers as they appear to be driven by the narrow agenda of Western firms. Wieczorek-Zeul said that Peter Mandelson and Louis Michel, the European commissioners for trade and development, will be invited to discuss the EPAs with EU development ministers in Bonn next month (12-13 March).

Wieczorek-Zeul also announced that plans are being drawn up for an EU-Africa energy agreement. This will follow an analysis by the Commission on energy resources in Africa.

The German presidency will also be introducing new guidelines on improving the efficiency of EU aid. "In order to reduce worldwide poverty by half by the year 2015 we simply must make the best of each euro available for development cooperation," she added. "Aid that is poorly organised is a burden on developing countries. Effective aid saves human lives".

Commission backtracks on aid to anti-terror schemes

The European Commission has agreed to remove all proposals for using EU development assistance for anti-terrorism projects in its aid plans for Asia and Latin America.

The announcement – made to the European Parliament's development committee last week (30 January) – follows concerns raised by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Eurostep argued that references to the fight against terrorism in country strategy papers for Malaysia, Colombia, Pakistan and Indonesia were inappropriate. Such expenditure would not meet the criteria on what constitutes aid set by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris.

Some 33 of the Commission's country strategy papers for Asia and Latin America have been approved by EU governments; these include a single document covering five central Asian countries.

MEPs have nonetheless raised numerous concerns about these papers. Among the MEPs' criticisms were that there is a lack of clear relation between the papers and

the UN's Millennium Development Goals of dramatically reducing extreme poverty by 2015, insufficient information on the sources of funding to be used and inadequate details on consultation with parliaments, local authorities and NGOs in developing countries.

The development committee has decided to make a formal request to the Commission on how the papers will comply with the EU's legal obligation that at least 20% of aid to Asia and Latin America goes to health and education.

Borrell to chair development committee

Spanish Socialist Josep Borrell has been appointed chairman of the European Parliament's development committee, replacing Italian left-wing MEP Luisa Morgantini. Since mid-2004, Borrell had been president of the entire Parliament.

The three vice-chairpersons of the committee are Dutch Socialist Max van den Berg, Slovenian centre-right deputy Romana Jordan Cizelj, Lithuanian Liberal Danute Budrekaite and German Green Frithjof Schmidt.

Meanwhile, Riina Kionka has been appointed the new personal representative on human rights for the EU's High Representative on Foreign Policy Javier Solana. Kionka is a former undersecretary for EU affairs in Estonia's foreign ministry.

'No referenda before 2009' – Blair

Britain's Labour government is determined to avoid referenda on an EU treaty ahead of the country's general election in 2009, The Times has reported.

Prime Minister Tony Blair is reported to be open only to a "mini-treaty", as proposed by French presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, which focuses on institutional arrangements. Chancellor Brown, his likely successor in 10 Downing Street, is said to not even be considering any proposals that would involve a referendum.

The UK has put its ratification process of the draft EU constitution on hold, after the constitution was rejected in 2005 by voters in France and the Netherlands.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, currently holding the EU presidency, is to present a plan for salvaging the constitution to a June summit of the Union's heads of state and government.

US farm offer 'inadequate' - Commission

A new US offer to cut farm spending by at least \$10 billion (€7.7 bn) over the next five years does not go far enough to ensure a successful conclusion to the Doha round of world trade talks, the European Commission has said.

Michael Mann, the Commission's agriculture spokesman, described the proposal for a US farm bill as a "modest shift" towards less trade-distorting subsidies but said that the EU executive had hoped it would be more ambitious.

Although the Doha round has been held back by disagreements over agriculture, the US bill does not go beyond the cut in annual trade-distorting subsidies from \$22 bn to \$17 billion which the Americans had already offered to international trade negotiators on an informal basis.

Oxfam described the new proposal as an "encouraging step" but is seeking greater clarity about whether it would be compatible with the rules of the World Trade Organisation. Oxfam has been sharply critical of the current farm bill, which expires later this year, arguing that it facilitates the dumping of food surpluses on developing countries, thereby undermining the livelihoods of millions of poor farmers.

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