

WRITTEN QUESTION by Cristian Silviu Buşoi (ALDE) to the Commission

Subject: EU-wide early warning systems

Parliament has already expressed its attachment to the establishment of an EU-wide early warning system for citizens in the event of disasters through several acts adopted by it. The Papadimoulis Report of 2006 (A6-0286/2006) on the Community Civil Protection Mechanism made explicit reference to such a system not only for authorities but also for citizens. However, the final decision adopted in 2007 (779/2007/EC(1)) totally neglected the early warning system for citizens.

When asked for an opinion on an amendment on the Telecom Package concerning this matter, the Commission provided a negative response because it considered it to be a civil protection issue. However, European citizens should equally benefit from the highest level of protection against all types of hazards throughout the EU. The establishment of an EU-wide early warning system for citizens could not only save lives but also avoid economic losses, which proves its necessity. Given the above: 1. what does the Commission intend to do in order to enhance protection of European citizens against disasters?

2. Does the Commission have a concrete action plan concerning the implementation of an early warning system for citizens?

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Answer given by Mr Dimas
on behalf of the Commission
(15.12.2008)

The activities of the Commission in the area of early warning systems are described in its Staff Working Document "Towards Better Protecting Citizens against Disaster Risks: Strengthening Early Warning Systems in Europe"¹.

In 2007, the Commission has established an expert group on early warning systems composed of experts from Member State civil protection authorities². The aim is to foster the exchange of best practice in Europe. The Commission has also organised seminars in 2007 and 2008 focusing on early warning systems for tsunamis and floods. A seminar on best practice in warning the population is foreseen under the Czech EU Presidency in 2009.

A survey undertaken by the Civil Protection Unit of the Commission in 2007 revealed that all countries in the EU have established warning systems on their territory and thus are able to provide at least a basic layer of protection to their citizens against the most common hazards, including man-made hazards (for example radiological). However, the survey also identifies gaps and shortcomings: specific hazards such as tsunami risks in the Mediterranean area are not covered, delays for alerts, warning signals may not reach or may not be understood by all persons at risk.

While focusing on the establishment of an early warning system for tsunamis in the Mediterranean area, many of the ideas brought forward in the above-mentioned paper will contribute to a strengthening of early warning systems in Europe in a more general sense. Measures for better information sharing, more powerful and rapid communication tools etc. are not only beneficial for tsunami warning systems, but should, if applied systematically, contribute to strengthen other warning systems as well.

¹ SEC (2007) 1721 of 14.12.2007.

² EWS expert group nr: E02175. Link: <http://wlsacc.cc.cec.eu.int:9231/regexp/>

In this context it is also relevant to mention that there are early warning systems in other areas. In the health sector there are EWRS³ for communicable diseases established in 1999 and the RAS-BICHAT⁴. In the food sector there is RASFF⁵, which has been in place since 1979, and in the consumer sector there is RAPEX⁶, which exists in its current form since 2004. In the radiological/nuclear sector there is the European Community Urgent Radiological Information Exchange (EUCURIE) which has been in place since 1987. The purpose of all these systems is to provide the Member States (and their control authorities) via central contact points and the Commission with effective tools for rapid exchange of information in the respective areas. It should be underlined that warning the population falls within the mandate of national authorities. Several of them, like the Netherlands, are currently upgrading their systems with modern technology

³ Early Warning and Response System.

⁴ Rapid Alert System for Biological and Chemical Agent attacks (also including nuclear agents).

⁵ Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed.

⁶ Rapid Alert System for Non-Food Consumer Products.