

EUROPEAN REFUGEE FUND

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The Council took note of the state of play of the Commission's proposal for a European Refugee Fund and called on COREPER and the competent Working Parties to intensify work with a view to enabling the JHA Council to reach agreement on the draft Decision at its next meeting in May. It furthermore urged the Commission to bring forward a proposal on a temporary protection regime as soon as possible.

The draft decision provides for the Fund to be established for a period of five years starting from 1 January 2000, with an amount of 26 million euro for 2000, drawing on experience gained from actions set in train over the past few years, with the objective to help finance Member States' actions for the reception, integration and voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons. The proposal also provides for a financial reserve of 10 million euro to be used for emergency assistance measures in the event of a sudden mass influx of such persons.

The European Refugee Fund will be a significant step towards setting up a framework for the development of co-operation within the Community in this area. The Presidency underlined the need for the speedy creation of legal instruments allowing for the disbursement of funds already set aside for this purpose in the 2000 budget.

With respect to the funding aspects of the proposed fund, Commissioner Vitorino indicated that a multi-annual funding programme was under consideration in the Commission, to be drawn up in full respect of the Community's established five-year financial framework. In this context one delegation stressed the need to place an overall cap on funding levels and called for the fund to be centrally controlled.

The question of Article 5 on emergency measures in case of a sudden large influx of asylum seekers was raised by a number of delegations which feel that it is premature to include such a provision in the absence of a Community regime on temporary protection. Furthermore they asked for more specific guidelines on the groups which might benefit from the emergency funds and the terms and conditions under which such funds would be released. In this respect one delegation proposed that the Council act as the arbiter of decisions on emergency measures. Other delegations voiced the view that the inclusion of an article 5 type provision would not prejudice the future Community regime, but that it would enable those Member States faced with a large influx of "economic" asylum seekers to cope with some of the financial burden.

The Presidency voiced its satisfaction at the Commission's openness to further discussions on the criteria and management provisions governing the allocation of funds - these important questions still need to be resolved - and to envisage the streamlining of the control mechanisms which are, in the view of most delegations, too cumbersome for the relatively modest amounts involved.