

SITTING OF TUESDAY I, 13 JANUARY 2004
Question Time (Commission)

Report on questions by Members of Parliament and Answers of Commissioner
Patten:
On the issue of obsolete pesticides in Ukraine

Questions directed to Mr. Patton

Question tabled by Dorette Corbey (H-0796/03):

The problem of obsolete pesticides of 20.000 tons, spread over more than 5000 locations in Ukraine, need to be tackled with environmentally sound modern technologies, which will need a total budget varying from 60 to 100 million US Dollars.

Is DG RELEX able to set-up a concrete program for the solution of the Ukrainian problem within its existing financial system?

Question tabled by Jan Marinus Wiersma (H-0797/03):

The problem of obsolete pesticides aggravates the situation in Ukraine where 20.000 tons are present at more than 5.000 locations, threatening drinking water and health of the local population.

In spite of the adoption of the 6th Environmental Framework in June 2001, containing a specific paragraph on pesticides which includes specific action for the elimination of dangers due to obsolete pesticides, now 3,5 years have been passed without any substantial improvement of the situation.

Is DG RELEX able to come forward with a constructive financial solution or instrument for Ukraine?

Question tabled by Robert Goodwill (H-0798/03):

The huge problem of obsolete pesticides in the Ukraine effects health and environment and needs urgent tackling of more than 20.000 tons spread all over the country at at least 5000 locations.

On the basis of the EU Parliament resolution of 23rd of October on the draft general budget of the EU for the financial year 2004, where Paragraph 73 notes the dangers to the environment from POPs (Persistent Organic Pollutants) and in particular obsolete pesticides and urges the Commission to make the extra effort needed to find sufficient financial funds under the existing instruments for its elimination in Ukraine.

Is DG RELEX able to take steps which will lead to an appropriate solution?

Patten, Commission.

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We are aware of the threat to the environment and to consumer health that obsolete pesticides constitute in Ukraine and aware, too, of the magnitude of the challenge that their elimination poses to that country.

Ukraine has taken a positive step concerning the elimination of some of the obsolete pesticides, in particular those that are persistent organic pollutants, by signing the Stockholm Convention regarding the elimination and reduction of those pollutants. The ratification of the Convention is still pending. The Commission urges Ukraine to ratify the Convention and to cooperate with the international community to work on this difficult problem.

Responsibility for dealing with obsolete pesticides is primarily for the country itself. While the Commission is prepared to assist Ukraine to the extent possible (E and I should just note that our assistance to Ukraine amounts to EUR 126 million a year (E current EU assistance programmes do not provide funding for the elimination of obsolete pesticides in Ukraine. In fact, environmental issues have not been selected by the Government of Ukraine as a key cooperation area with the European Union. However, TACIS small project programmes could accommodate project proposals linked to the elimination of obsolete pesticides. Taking into account the amount of pesticides to be eliminated, an EU contribution could only partially alleviate the vast problem. As a signatory to the Stockholm Convention, Ukraine is eligible for funding from the interim Global Environmental Facility, which is the financing mechanism of the Convention.

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Wiersma (PSE). (E We have been and continue to be very active in dealing with the consequences of Chernobyl and other environmental disasters, but I should like to ask the Commissioner what more we can do in order to prevent another environmental disaster occurring when something goes wrong with pesticides. Could he approach the Ukraine authorities on these issues, since we shall be raising them in Parliament at the next meeting of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Cooperation Committee that is to take place next month? What more can he do in terms of contacting the Ukraine Government and looking again at how the Tacis Programme can contribute to that? After the Chernobyl experience we have to prompt Ukraine to do something. The Commissioner knows as well as I do how that country functions. This will not be its top priority. We must tell Ukraine that dealing with these kinds of methods is a top priority for the EU.

2-266

Patten, Commission.

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I totally agree with the honourable Member that obsolete pesticides are a real and serious problem, not just in Ukraine; they are a common problem in all too many post-Soviet regions, as well as in some acceding and candidate countries. The estimate is that in Ukraine there are perhaps up to 20 000 tonnes of these pesticides in 5000 locations and, as the honourable Member knows, they can affect human health because of the contamination of groundwaters, soil, food and even air.

The honourable Member mentioned Chernobyl: I was there recently. We have dedicated a lot of time and a great deal of money to that extraordinarily difficult and dangerous environmental issue. There we are working with the government of the Ukraine, which wishes to take that as a priority. It has not been easy even in those circumstances. What is more difficult for us, is to insist on our priorities through a programme such as TACIS, in which the partner country is supposed to take ownership of the programme we are helping to support.

I can assure the honourable Member that we will continue to raise this issue and other environmental issues in the relevant subcommittee of the partnership and cooperation agreement. We will raise this issue during those meetings and if the government in Ukraine says it would like us to focus some of our spending on this issue, we would be delighted to look at that. But the figures involved are very substantial. It is reckoned that it would cost at least EUR 100 million for the elimination of the problem I described earlier, and that is why, in our judgment, it is probably more helpful to turn to the global environmental facility in order to secure an objective which the honourable Member is quite right to highlight.

2-267

de Roo (Verts/ALE). **CE** I would like to thank the Commissioner for his explanation. I also know that it is a problem on the level of the government, but there are also political forces which are explicitly involved in this problem and which are on the side of the European Parliament, that has expressed that this problem has to be solved.

I would like to ask the Commissioner if he is prepared to hearten the political forces in Ukraine, which are at present not in the government, but possibly in the future, with the search for a solution for this extreme difficult and extreme dangerous problem in Ukraine.

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Patten, Commission.

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The honourable Member is entirely right to say that the issue we are discussing is of considerable concern to many groups in Ukraine, and many of the environmental NGOs which have begun to be active. The issue in which he has taken a particular interest - water contamination - has been of considerable concern to many people.

I can only repeat that we will raise this issue with the Ukrainian authorities. We will be willing, if they wish, to consider ways in which we could assist through the TACIS programme. However, the need for funds for the overall elimination of pesticides in Ukraine is beyond the present budgetary resources of the European Union, though we can encourage Ukraine to turn to other possible financing sources in order to deal with what is a horrendously difficult problem.