

Tasks and working methods of the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid

The German Bundestag established the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid for the first time in 1998. Until then there had been a "Subcommittee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid" in the German Bundestag, whose remit was limited to advising the Committee on Foreign Affairs on human rights issues. A central difference between the fully fledged committee and the previous subcommittee is that its responsibilities have been extended to include domestic political issues.

In setting up this body as a permanent committee, Parliament made clear the importance it attaches to policy on human rights.

In the current 15th legislative term, the members of the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid will be focusing in their deliberations on the following aspects:

- Questions relating to the further development of national, European and international instruments for the protection of human rights, and with the legal and political scrutiny of human rights infringements
- German human rights policy in the multinational and bilateral context
- Aspects of foreign, development and security policy, as well as economic and foreign economic policy, which have a bearing on human rights
- Aspects of asylum and refugee policy which have a bearing on human rights, as well as questions of policy on minorities and racism
- Issues of humanitarian aid

The Committee normally meets behind closed doors. However, it also holds public hearings. Subjects covered so far have been the problems of so-called non-state persecution with regard to asylum law, the question of economic, social and cultural human rights in Germany, a discussion on instruments and measures for combating torture, and the upholding of human rights in the war against terrorism.

The Committee has increased in size in the 15th legislative term by two members and now consists of 17 Members of the German Bundestag. Seven are members of the SPD parliamentary group and seven of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, while the parliamentary group of Alliance 90/The Greens has two members and the FDP one. The Chairperson of the Committee is Christa Nickels (Alliance 90/The Greens), and the Deputy Chairperson is Rainer Funke (FDP).

Human rights policy is a task cutting across a variety of policy fields. The Committee is therefore involved in parliamentary items on a very wide range of subjects. In most cases the Committee is involved in the parliamentary deliberations as a committee asked for an opinion. Increasingly the Committee submits comments which go beyond simply approving or rejecting an item and

often makes specific recommendations from the human rights perspective to the committee which has been assigned overall responsibility for the issue at hand.

The Committee keeps itself informed about the human rights situation in different countries. Hence its agenda is strongly influenced by current events, as is borne out by the reports it receives from the Federal Government on the situation in Afghanistan, Kosovo, China, Colombia, Turkey, East Timor and Iran, to name but a few. In addition, it constantly receives information on the Federal Government's humanitarian aid measures to alleviate poverty and hardship caused by natural disasters or armed conflict. These reports enable the members of the Committee to make appropriate use of their wide-ranging contacts with political institutions at home and abroad, with governments of other states, as well as with human rights groups, and to bring their influence to bear.

From the outset the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid has met with a very positive response from politicians at home and abroad, as well as from national and international human rights groups. These so-called non-governmental organizations seek to engage in dialogue with Committee members in order to inform them about the human rights situation in individual countries or specific issues. These exchanges take place either in the form of non-public hearings in the course of a regular committee meeting, or occasionally in detailed discussions held outside committee meetings with Members of Parliament interested in specific issues.

Not infrequently members of the public approach Committee members in the hope of obtaining concrete assistance with their requests if, for instance, they feel disadvantaged regarding their pension entitlement, if they want to take action against discrimination in the work place, or if they are requesting support for a foreigner threatened with deportation. The Committee is not empowered to deal with such requests from the public. Like all the other committees of the German Bundestag, it discusses only draft laws, EU items and motions put forward by parliamentary groups, the Bundesrat or the Federal Government. The Petitions Committee of the German Bundestag is the parliamentary body responsible for examining these requests or changes in the law proposed by members of the public, and recommending specific measures.