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Intervention at Plenary Session of EuroMed Foreign Affairs Ministerial Meeting

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

EuroMed Foreign Affairs Ministerial Meeting

Tampere, Finland, 28 November 2006

Ministers, Colleagues, dear friends,

Let me first of all congratulate and thank Foreign Minister Tuomioja and the Finnish Presidency for the tremendous work they have put into the preparation of this meeting and for hosting this ministerial in the beautiful and historic town of Tampere.

Dear Friends,

We stand at an important juncture in our partnership. The means and mechanisms for an even closer and more comprehensive partnership are now available to us. But it needs our combined courage and determination to ensure that we realize our joint objectives and ambitions. We have in the Barcelona process a unique forum of discussion to help us address transnational and regional issues such as energy and transport interconnections and dialogue on collective peace and security as well as migration. And now we are developing the European Neighbourhood Policy as the framework for deepening bilateral cooperation with neighbouring countries in full coherence with the Barcelona process.

However, I am fully aware that if we want to exploit the full potential of that partnership, the resolution of the Middle East conflict remains paramount. We must maintain our resolve to achieve a lasting and just settlement consistent with the Road Map and to promote progress in the Middle East Peace Process on all tracks, Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese. However, stalled or slow progress in that process must not be used as an excuse to hinder the necessary advances in our joint programmes. And I can tell you now that we are committed, despite the difficult regional situation, to implement the reform agenda that is so important for achieving our joint objectives of peace, prosperity and security for the region.

The Commission has followed with concern the series of events that have unfolded in Lebanon throughout the last weeks, and in particular the shocking assassination of Pierre Gemayel, Minister for Industry, on 21 November. The Commission condemns this horrible act of violence and trusts that the perpetrators will be brought to justice. It calls on all political actors in Lebanon and the region to exercise restraint. The Commission reaffirms its commitment to support the Government of Lebanon in its initiatives for reconstruction and reform. In August 2006 the Stockholm conference generated substantial resources for humanitarian aid and early recovery for Lebanon. A second conference is planned for January in Paris. In this conference we will highlight the importance of the socio-economic and political framework in which reconstruction will take place.

Despite a year that has witnessed some political setbacks the year has also offered much hope for the further development and deepening of our Partnership. This has been a year of 'firsts' in our relations with our Mediterranean partners. It was just a year ago that the heads of State and Government met for the first time, in Barcelona, to forge a 5-year working programme that would offer direction and determination to our relations; this year also saw the historic first ever Ministerial conference devoted to women's issues with the successful outcome of the Istanbul meeting on 'Strengthening the Role of Women in Society'; the Civil Forum that took place a few weeks ago in Marrakech was the first one to take place in a partner country; and this year also oversaw another first - the extension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to include an ongoing dialogue with the media.

These are certainly reasons to feel encouraged, while remaining cautious. And I would like to continue on a positive note. On my return to Brussels we will present an important Commission communication on 'Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy,' which will obviously be of importance to almost everyone here today. We will confirm that the ENP is on track and working well and give a résumé of the progress made in the past two years in implementing the first jointly agreed ENP Action Plans.

Based on this assessment and on what I have heard from you over the last two years, the Commission will also propose that the EU 'offer' to its partners should be increased in order to better respond to your needs and demands – whether on the trade side or mobility of people, more cooperation on important sectors such as energy or increased exchanges between students. I am very keen to engage in a discussion with you over the coming months on the basis of the proposals contained in the Communication.

Let me reassure you that the Commission attaches great importance to the implementation of the Neighbourhood policy and the Barcelona Summit work programme. This importance can be measured by the significant resources attributed, under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, to promote mutually agreed reforms and modernization. They amount to €12 billion for the period 2007-2013, an increase of 32% in real terms. As well as this proposed amount for the future, the Commission aid to Mediterranean partners of €975 million for the year 2006 amply underlines the EU's commitment to the region's development.

Last year in Barcelona our Heads of State and Government agreed a far-reaching and ambitious Five-Year Work Programme to help us advance our relations and move closer to the realization of those objectives. Now, one year later the 'end of term' report can be marked as satisfactory progress, but still much work to be done. And that is what we are here to do today – to agree on the priorities and activities for 2007.

In the Barcelona Summit last November our countries, all our countries, agreed on a Euro-Mediterranean code of conduct on countering terrorism. This was a momentous achievement, but now we have to transform that code into concrete activities. Therefore, during 2007 we will hold Euromed seminars on the sensitive and associated areas of 'the role of the media in preventing incitement to terrorism' and also 'how to ensure respect for human rights in the fight against terrorism.' We will also look at human security issues and co-operation in the area of elections.

I have repeatedly underlined the importance of education as a priority sector in our partnership and as a key factor for development in the region. The Commission, therefore, is pleased to announce that it will launch a scholarship scheme in 2007 open to university students from Partner countries. And I am also delighted to hear that Egypt will host a Ministerial Conference on higher education and scientific research in the second half of next year. Next year will be a busy year for ministers in the region as we also we hold Ministerial meetings on the Information Society, Migration, Energy and Tourism.

But it is not only ministers who will be busy next year. As the recent successful outcomes of the Civil Forum in Marrakech and the women's Ministerial in Istanbul illustrate we now have a vibrant, active and productive civil society in the region. The Euromed non-governmental platform is increasingly proving itself to be a reliable asset in our Partnership.

Although I would have expected more participation at a higher level, I was pleased with the successful outcome of the Istanbul ministerial on women. This conference was both timely and overdue. The agreed political declaration indicates the will of all 35 governments to work towards strengthening the role of women in society and of eradicating the inequalities in gender matters. And the Plan of Action, also agreed in Istanbul, must start as soon as possible.

Dear friends,

We have come a long way together and I know we can still travel further together towards the realization of our joint aspirations. The Commission is committed to that journey, one that we should all share with confidence and courage but not with complacency. Together we are stronger and I look forward to the continuation of this unique journey.

I thank you for your attention.