



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



5624/08 (Presse 19)

PROVISIONAL VERSION

PRESS RELEASE

2845th / 2846th Council meetings

General Affairs and External Relations

Brussels, 28 January 2008

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P R E S S

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5624/08 (Presse 19)

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Main results of the Council

*The Council decided to propose a political agreement on co-operation between the European Union and **Serbia**, providing a framework for making progress on political dialogue, free trade, visa liberalisation, and educational co-operation, to be signed on 7 February 2008. In this context the EU offers Serbia to intensify political co-operation with a view to accelerating its progress towards the EU, including candidate status. The Council underlined that a deepening relationship between the EU and Serbia, leading to membership, will bring concrete benefits to the people of Serbia, in particular through stimulating economic progress, commercial relations by developing a free trade area, and people to people contacts, including in particular students. It indicated that the EU will continue to reach out to the people of Serbia and recognised the importance of making it easier for Serbians to travel in the European Union. To this end the Commission will start a dialogue on visa liberalisation.*

*The Council decided to launch the military bridging **operation EUFOR Tchad/RCA** in Chad and the Central African Republic. It authorised the EU operation commander, General Nash (Ireland), with immediate effect, to release the activation order in order to execute the deployment of the forces and start the execution of the mission. The operation will contribute to the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1778 (2007) which authorises the deployment in Chad and Central African Republic of a multidimensional presence, including the EU providing the military element of it.*

*On the **Middle East**, the Council welcomed the start of negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian officials on all outstanding issues, including all final status issues, with a view to concluding a peace agreement before the end of 2008 as agreed in Annapolis last November. The Council expressed its deep concern about recent settlement activity, and about recent events in Gaza and the grave disturbances at the border between Gaza and Egypt. It expressed the EU's readiness to contribute to the implementation of a peaceful and orderly solution to the current situation in the framework of an agreement involving the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Israel. The EU is ready to consider resuming its monitoring mission at Rafah under the provisions of the relevant international agreements related to Access and Movement concluded in November 2005.*

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- Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
- Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's Internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
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PARTICIPANTS

The governments of the Member States and the European Commission were represented as follows:

Belgium:

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Bulgaria:

Mr Ivailo KALFIN Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs
Ms Gergana Hristova GRANCHAROVA Minister for European Affairs

Czech Republic:

Mr Alexandr VONDRA Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for European Affairs
Minister for Foreign Affairs

Denmark:

Mr Per Stig MØLLER Minister for Foreign Affairs
Mr Michael ZILMER-JOHNS State Secretary for Foreign and Security Policy, EU Policy and EU Coordination

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Mr Günter GLOSER Minister of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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Mr Ioannis VALINAKIS State Secretary for Foreign Affairs

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Mr Albert NAVARRO GONZÁLEZ State Secretary for the European Union

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Mr Jean-Pierre JOUYET Minister of State for European Affairs

Italy:

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Cyprus:

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Sweden:

Mr Carl BILDT
Ms Cecilia MALMSTRÖM

Minister for Foreign Affairs
Minister for European Affairs

United Kingdom:

Mr David MILIBAND

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

.....
Commission:

Mr Olli REHN
Ms Benita FERRERO-WALDNER

Member
Member
.....

General Secretariat of the Council:

Mr Javier SOLANA

Secretary-General/High Representative for the CFSP

ITEMS DEBATED

PAKISTAN

The Council held an exchange of views on the latest developments in Pakistan, in the run-up to general elections on 18 February.

It highlighted the need to hold free and fair elections by this new date, allowing for a democratic and transparent electoral process under proper security conditions. It emphasised that stability and further progress on the path towards democracy are amongst the most important challenges facing Pakistan, and that the EU would continue to support the Pakistani people in addressing these challenges.

The Council was also briefed on plans regarding the deployment of an EU electoral observation mission to Pakistan.

MIDDLE EAST

– ***MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS - Council conclusions***

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"The EU welcomes the start of negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian officials on all outstanding issues, including all final status issues, with a view to concluding a peace agreement before the end of 2008 as agreed in Annapolis last November. The Council reaffirms that this is a crucial opportunity for regional and international partners to support effectively a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. In this context, the Council calls for a continued broad and constructive involvement by Arab partners, building on the Arab Peace Initiative. The Council urges the parties to implement their Road Map obligations in parallel with their negotiations. The goal remains the establishment of an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza that will unite all Palestinians, living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours.

The EU considers that settlement building anywhere in the occupied Palestinian Territories is illegal under international law. This includes Israeli settlements in both East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Settlement construction is an obstacle to peace. The EU is therefore deeply concerned by recent settlement activity, particularly the recent tenders issued for new construction in Har Homa. The Road Map is clear that Israel should freeze all settlement activity, including the natural growth of existing settlements, and dismantle all outposts erected since March 2001.

The Council is deeply concerned about recent events in Gaza and the grave disturbances at the border between Gaza and Egypt. It expresses its sympathy for the civilian populations affected by the violence in Gaza and in Southern Israel. It condemns the continued firing of rockets into Israeli territory and all other activities which are contrary to international law and endanger civilians. While recognising Israel's legitimate right to self-defence, the Council calls for an immediate end to all acts of violence. It reiterates its grave concern at the humanitarian situation in Gaza and calls for the continuous provision of essential goods and services, including fuel and power supplies. The Council calls on Israel to fulfil its obligations to Gaza. The Council reiterates its call on all parties to work urgently for the controlled re-opening of the crossings in and out of Gaza for both humanitarian reasons and commercial flows. In that context, the Council underlines its support for the proposal by the Palestinian Authority to take control of the crossings and supports the Arab League resolution in that respect. The EU will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the population of Gaza and stands ready to assist in the economic rehabilitation of Gaza. The EU reiterates its call for the immediate release of the Israeli soldier abducted 19 months ago and commends efforts including by partners in the region, to that effect.

The Council commends and supports efforts by the government of Egypt to find a peaceful and orderly solution to the current situation, and expresses the EU readiness to contribute to its implementation in the framework of an agreement involving the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Israel. The EU is ready to consider resuming its monitoring mission at Rafah under the provisions of the relevant international agreements related to Access and Movement concluded in November 2005.

The EU reaffirms its commitment to remain actively involved in order to support the parties' efforts to keep the negotiation on track, working closely with other members of the Quartet and partners in the region. The EU remains determined to contribute significantly to this effort, as laid down in its Action Strategy: "State building for Peace in the Middle East", which covers the broad range of its assistance activities. The EU welcomes the agreement reached on the accreditation procedure of EUPOL COPPS, which will allow the EU to support Palestinian Civilian Police in order to further strengthen security and law and order.

The EU welcomes the results of the International Donors' Conference for the Palestinian State last December, namely over 7,4 billion US-\$ in pledges, and calls on all donors to deliver on their pledges in support of efforts to build the future Palestinian State in accordance with the Reform and Development Plan presented by Prime Minister Fayyad. In this context, the EU recalls the utmost importance of the full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access. The EU is committed to providing substantial financial support for the Palestinian people, and welcomes the work of the Commission to launch a new funding mechanism PEGASE, which will constitute a key channel for EU and other international assistance. The EU continues to support the work of the Quartet Representative, Tony Blair. "

– ***LEBANON - Council conclusions***

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

- "1. The Council condemns in the strongest possible terms the terrorist attack perpetrated in Beirut on 25 January, that claimed the lives of Internal Security Forces' Captain Wissam Eid and four others, the bombing of a US diplomatic vehicle in Beirut that killed three people and injured several others on 15 January, and the attack on UNIFIL on 8 January. The Council reiterates its firm denunciation of all terrorist attacks and of all attempts to undermine peace and stability in Lebanon.
2. The Council remains strongly concerned at the continued absence of a Head of State in Lebanon. It regrets that it has not yet been possible to elect a new President, and that the parliamentary session has been postponed yet another time until 11 February.
3. The Council welcomes the unanimous endorsement by the extraordinary session of the Foreign Ministers of the Arab League held on 6 January in Cairo of a plan for the immediate election of the president, the formation of a national unity government and the adoption of a new electoral law. The Council warmly welcomes the mediation efforts by the Secretary General of the Arab League aimed at a rapid solution of the crisis.
4. It calls upon the parties to work responsibly in order to implement without any further delay the plan of the Arab League, as well as to refrain from all actions that could upset public order and the security of the citizens. In this regard, the Council deplors the escalating tension which has led to further loss of lives. Recalling the importance of stability in Lebanon for the whole region, the Council looks forward to the full resumption of the functioning of democratic institutions in Lebanon.
5. The Council reiterates its support to the legitimate and democratic government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and to the Lebanese Armed Forces and their contribution to the stability of the country.
6. The Council recalls previous statements and remains determined to reinforce Lebanon's sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, unity and stability, according notably to UNSC Resolutions 1559, 1680, 1701 and 1757. In this respect, the Council looks forward to the start of the work of the Special Tribunal as soon as possible.
7. The Council also condemns the rocket attacks launched against Israel on 8 January."

AFRICA

– ***KENYA - Council conclusions***

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"1. The Council remains extremely concerned at the continued uncertainty, instability and serious crisis arising from the recent presidential elections in Kenya and is monitoring the situation closely. The Council regrets the loss of life and the serious humanitarian consequences that have ensued after the elections. It condemns the acts of violence that have taken place, for which there can be no impunity, and underlines the need to protect the human rights of all in Kenya. It calls upon all the political leaders in Kenya to act urgently to bring violence to an end and ensure security for all Kenyans by publicly and unequivocally rejecting all forms of violence, restraining their followers and encouraging all concerned, including police and army officials, to exercise maximum restraint. It calls on all political leaders to resort to dialogue immediately and secure a political solution based on democratic principles and to the benefit of the Kenyan people. The Council further calls upon the Kenyan authorities to restore the right of the media to work freely and the right of assembly and to avoid excessive or lethal force against those demonstrating peacefully.

2. The Council recalls that the initial findings of the EU Election Observer Mission and reports from other independent observers, notably from the Commonwealth, the International Republican Institute, the East African Community and a number of domestic observer groups, cast serious doubts on the official results of the presidential elections. The Council calls for all allegations of election irregularities to be urgently and thoroughly investigated through appropriate means and in a way that helps to restore the trust of the Kenyan people in democracy. .

3. Building on the commendable efforts of President Kufuor, President of the African Union (AU), the Council welcomes and lends its full support to the ongoing efforts of the Panel of Eminent African Personalities, led by Mr Kofi Annan. The Council is encouraged by the meeting between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga on 24 January 2008 but urges Kenya's political leaders now to build on this meeting urgently by pursuing their stated commitment to dialogue and to work together for a just and sustainable peace. The EU stands ready to provide any assistance it can to this process.

4. The Council continues to urge all parties to live up to their responsibilities by engaging constructively and fully in this process, working jointly through dialogue on all issues, including electoral and constitutional reform, and to agree a sustainable and consensual political solution to the crisis. The Council believes such a solution should reflect the clear democratic will of the Kenyan people and enable Kenya's politicians to overcome their divisions. The EU expresses its willingness to provide any assistance it can to Kenya to help develop and implement the elements of such a political solution, as requested.

5. Until a legitimate solution is agreed, the EU and its Member States cannot conduct business as usual with Kenya. Failure to find a sustainable and consensual political solution would affect donors' engagement with Kenya and EU Kenya relations. Bearing in mind the Lisbon Summit and shared values recently enshrined in the Lisbon Plan of Action, the Council will decide upon its next course of action towards the situation in Kenya, and Kenya's political leaders, on the basis of their engagement with the Eminent Personalities initiative and progress towards the lasting political solution referred to above.

6. The Council reiterates its continued commitment to respond to the humanitarian needs of Kenyans affected, or displaced from their homes, by the recent acts of violence and stands ready to provide further assistance as required. The Council expresses its concern about the difficulties faced by those engaged in humanitarian assistance and economic activities in Kenya and the region.

7. The Council will continue to monitor closely the events in Kenya and support all efforts to ensure democracy, respect for human rights and stability in the country."

– ***SUDAN/CHAD/CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC - Council conclusions***

The Council discussed the situation in Sudan, Chad and the CAR, in the presence of Jan Eliasson, the UN Secretary-General's special envoy for Darfur. It adopted the following conclusions:

"1. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) is the basis for sustainable peace and development throughout Sudan and its implementation must be pursued as a key priority. Therefore the Council welcomes that the parties to the CPA have resumed their cooperation in the Government of National Unity (GNU) and agreed on the full and timely implementation of all the provisions of the CPA. The Council urges the parties to ensure their commitments are honoured, including on still outstanding issues such as the status of Abyei and the formation, training and deployment of the Joint Integrated Units (JIU). It also calls for concrete steps to revitalise and strengthen the Assessment and Evaluation Commission. The Council supports the important role of UNMIS and encourages the parties to take full advantage of its presence and mandate, including its tasks to provide support to reconciliation in all its aspects, emphasising the role of women and civil society, and with regard to the necessary preparation (including the census) for the conduct of the general elections in 2009.

2. The Council welcomes the transfer of authority from AMIS to UNAMID for the operation in Darfur and underlines the need to address the considerable challenges facing the deployment of UNAMID. It calls on the Sudanese authorities, notably the GNU, to lend their full support to the effective establishment of UNAMID, including necessary technical and administrative arrangements for this purpose and to accept all troops deemed necessary by the UN and the AU for successful discharge of its mandate. In this context, the Council deplores the unwillingness of the Sudanese Authorities to accept Sweden's and Norway's contributions to UNAMID. Furthermore, the Council strongly condemns the attack on 7 January by elements of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) on a UNAMID supply convoy and calls on the Government of Sudan (GoS) to fulfil its promises of full cooperation. The Council reiterates its readiness to take necessary measures, notably within a UN-framework, against any party that impedes the establishment of an effective UNAMID force.

3. The Council attaches utmost importance to the continued, unimpeded and safe humanitarian access to the population in Darfur. It urges the GoS to respect its commitment to a Moratorium on restrictions and obstacles to all humanitarian work in Darfur, as set out in the Joint Communiqué on this matter, and to review issues of concern through established channels (for example the High Level Committee). The Council welcomes the recent announcement of the extension of this Moratorium on restrictions and obstacles to all humanitarian work in Darfur. In this connection, the Council stands ready to consider further measures, notably within a UN-framework, against any party that undermines peace and security in Darfur or the region by committing acts of violence and especially against any party that obstructs humanitarian access.

4. There can be no impunity for the crimes committed in Darfur. The Council calls on the GoS to cooperate unconditionally with the International Criminal Court (ICC) and to surrender the two individuals for whom it issued arrest warrants on 27 April 2007 in relation to alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur.

5. The Council calls on all parties in the Darfur conflict to cease their hostilities and engage in the peace process mediated by the UN and AU Special Envoys. It underlines that the effectiveness of UNAMID will only be guaranteed if an inclusive political agreement between the parties to the conflict in Darfur is reached. The Council therefore recalls its position that any party failing to engage constructively in the peace process is to be considered as an obstacle to peace and that it will promote appropriate further measures against it, notably in the UN framework.

6. The Council is seriously concerned over the deterioration of the security situation in the border region of Sudan and Chad, including the recent attacks by rebel groups from Darfur in eastern Chad as well as the incursions of Chadian armed forces into Sudan. The Council urges the Chadian and the Sudanese governments to abstain from any action that could further destabilise the current situation whilst exercising the utmost restraint and settling differences through dialogue and diplomatic channels. The Council urges the governments of Sudan and Chad to terminate support to armed groups operating in Eastern Chad or Darfur and recalls their responsibility in accordance with their agreements to prevent armed groups from crossing the common border.

7. Deploring the renewed attacks by Chadian rebel groups, the Council stresses the importance and urgency to foster a continuous peace process between the Chadian government and the armed rebel groups. In this perspective the Council welcomes the efforts of regional neighbours, particularly Libya. It also welcomes the progress made in implementing the accord of 13 August 2007 committing the Chadian authorities to work closely with the unarmed political opposition in addressing defined shortfalls notably in view of the legislative elections in 2009. In this context, the Council calls upon the still active armed rebel groups to abandon all attempts of further pursuing military options and instead, pursuing a democratic path. It reminds all parties that an internal political settlement remains the only viable perspective for peace and stability in Chad.

8. The Council launched the military bridging operation EUFOR Tchad/RCA. It authorised the EU operation commander, with immediate effect, to release the activation order in order to execute the deployment of the forces and start the execution of the mission. The Council reaffirms its full commitment to contribute to the implementation of the UNSC-Resolution 1778 (2007) which authorises the deployment in Chad and Central African Republic of a multidimensional presence, including the EU providing the military element of it. In accordance with this resolution, the EU conducts this military bridging operation for a period of 12 months from the declaration of Initial Operational Capability which is planned to be reached in March 2008. A mid mandate review after 6 months, conducted in conjunction with the UN, will assess the need for a possible UN follow-on capability.

9. In conducting this operation the EU is stepping up its longstanding action in support of efforts to tackle the crisis in Darfur and to address its regional ramifications, notably in Eastern Chad and North-eastern Central African Republic. In this context, EUFOR Tchad/RCA will ensure a high degree of coordination with UNAMID. The deployment of this EU operation has been welcomed by both the governments of Chad and Central African Republic. EUFOR Tchad/RCA will actively work for the improvement of the security situation in Chad and Central African Republic. It will contribute to protecting civilians in danger, particularly displaced persons and refugees, to facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid and the free movement of humanitarian personnel and to protecting UN personnel, facilities, installations and equipment. It is part of the EU's multi-faceted support to the area, which includes European Commission support to the UN police mission in Chad. The European Commission and Member States will also continue their ongoing development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

10. The Council underlined that the bridging military operation EUFOR Tchad/RCA will be conducted in a neutral, impartial and independent manner. Throughout the mission, EUFOR Tchad/RCA will coordinate closely with the United Nations and cooperate with the Governments of Chad and the Central African Republic.

11. Systematic mainstreaming of Human Rights, Gender Issues and Child Protection (in line with UNSC – Resolution 1612 and the Checklist for the Protection of Children affected by Armed Conflict in ESDP Operations) into operational planning and in the execution of the operation is to be ensured by specially designated personnel at all levels.

12. The operation will be commanded from the EU Operations Head Quarter (OHQ) in Mont Valérien (Paris) by Lieutenant General Patrick NASH (Ireland); the Force in theatre will be commanded from Abeche (Chad) by Brigadier General Jean-Philippe Ganascia (France). The operation will cooperate closely with the UN mission MINURCAT and with the humanitarian and development organisations present in Chad and CAR. "

IRAN

At lunch, ministers reviewed the situation regarding the Iranian nuclear issue notably following the meeting in Berlin on 22 January of the foreign ministers of China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the United States as well as the EU High Representative concerning a new UN Security Council Resolution.

WESTERN BALKANS - Council conclusions

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"Serbia

The Council agreed on the text of the invitation at annex.

Visa facilitation and readmission agreements

The Council welcomed the entry into force of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Albania ¹, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on 1 January 2008. They will foster more people-to-people contacts and increase the economic ties between the EU and the region.

Recalling its conclusions of 10 December 2007, the Council also welcomed the intention of the European Commission to launch soon a visa dialogue with all the countries in the region and expressed its readiness to further discuss this issue, based on the Commission's forthcoming Communication on the Western Balkans, with a view to define detailed roadmaps setting clear benchmarks to be met by all the countries in the region in order to gradually advance towards visa liberalisation. This would enable the Council and the Commission to closely monitor progress in necessary reforms.

¹ The EC/Albania readmission agreement entered into force on 1 May 2006.

Invitation of the European Union to Sign a Political Agreement on Co-operation with Serbia

The European Union proposes a Political Agreement on co-operation between the European Union and Serbia, providing a framework for making progress on political dialogue, free trade, visa liberalisation, and educational co-operation, to be signed on 7 February 2008.

Serbia has a crucial role to play in the Western Balkans, both for ensuring stability and as a motor for the economic development and prosperity of the region. The European Union wishes to deepen its relationship with Serbia, which draws on a rich and diverse range of cultural, historic, economic and people to people ties.

In this context the European Union offers Serbia to intensify political co-operation with a view to accelerating Serbia's progress towards the EU, including candidate status.

The Serbian people are part of the European family. A deepening relationship between the European Union and Serbia, leading to membership, will bring concrete benefits to the people of Serbia, in particular through stimulating economic progress, commercial relations by developing a free trade area, and people to people contacts, including in particular students. The European Union will continue to reach out to the people of Serbia and recognises the importance of making it easier for Serbians to travel in the European Union. To this end the Commission will start a dialogue on visa liberalisation.

To underline their shared commitment to deepening the relationship among their peoples, the European Union agrees to take rapid steps towards increasing the number of Serbian students who study in the EU, both through the ERASMUS Mundus programme and bilateral initiatives. In this context the European Union will urgently examine ways of increasing the funding available.

The Stabilisation and Association process remains the right vehicle to take forward this relationship. The European Union is committed to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement as soon as the necessary steps have been finalised. The European Union remains convinced of the benefits that the SAA will bring to both sides and of the positive effects this will have for the region as well. In this context the EU is committed to:

- support the efforts of Serbia to strengthen democracy and the rule of law;

- contribute to political, economic and institutional stability in Serbia;
- provide a framework for political dialogue, allowing the development of close political relations;
- support the efforts of Serbia to develop its economic and international co-operation, including through helping Serbia prepare its laws for eventual EU membership, including integration into the EU's single market;
- support Serbia's efforts to complete its transition into a functioning market economy;
- develop a free trade area between the Community and Serbia;
- and foster regional co-operation.
- With a view to achieving this, the European Union agrees to set up a Task Force to examine ways of delivering rapid progress. The work of the Task Force will start immediately with a view to formulating recommendations to Serbia and the Council of the European Union as quickly as possible.

We have agreed to stay in close contact with a view to furthering this process."

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Euro-Mediterranean partnership - Information society and tourism

The Council approved preparatory guidelines for the second Euro-Mediterranean ministerial conference on the information society (27 February in Cairo, Egypt) and the first Euro-Mediterranean ministerial conference on tourism (3 April in Fès, Morocco).

The texts will be forwarded to the Mediterranean partner countries for negotiation.

Sierra Leone - Exception to travel restrictions

The Council adopted a common position amending common position 98/409/CFSP, excluding, from travel restrictions currently with regard to force in Sierra Leone, witnesses whose presence at trial before a special court for Sierra Leone is required in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1793(2007) (5191/08).

EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICY

Launching of EU military operation in Chad and the Central African Republic

The Council adopted a decision on the launching of a European Union military operation in the Republic of Chad and in the Central African Republic (operation EUFOR Tchad/RCA). See Council conclusions on page 13.

The Council also adopted decisions approving the conclusion of agreements with Chad and Cameroon aimed at facilitating the deployment and transit in those countries of EU-led forces involved in the EUFOR Tchad/RCA operation.

Training programme in security and defence matters 2008 - 2010

The Council approved an EU training programme, in the field of European security and defence policy for the years 2008 to 2010 (5538/08).

ENLARGEMENT

Accession partnership with Turkey

The Council reached political agreement on a draft decision on the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the EU's accession partnership with Turkey.

The draft decision is based on regulation 390/2001 on assistance to Turkey in the framework of the pre-accession strategy, and in particular on the establishment of an accession partnership.

The EU-Turkey accession partnership is a key feature of the pre-accession strategy, identifying new as well as remaining priorities for action and providing guidance for targeted financial assistance to Turkey in response to its specific needs.

JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS

EU/ Switzerland - agreements on Schengen and Dublin acquis

The Council concluded, on behalf of the EU and the European Community, two agreements with Switzerland on its participation in the Schengen acquis (16592/07, 16591/07), and on its participation in the Dublin/Eurodac acquis (16590/07).

The Schengen agreement links Switzerland to the Schengen area. However, the border controls on persons between Switzerland and the member states participating in Schengen will be lifted once Switzerland had fulfilled all the necessary conditions for the application of the Schengen acquis (data protection, air and land borders, police cooperation, the Schengen Information System and visas-issuance).

The aim of the "Dublin/Eurodac" acquis is to formulate the criteria and mechanisms for establishing the State responsible for examining a request for asylum lodged in a member state. As of today, Switzerland will fully take part of this acquis.

These two agreements were signed in October 2004. Given their direct relationship, the procedures of the signature and the conclusion of both agreements have been linked.

Switzerland notified the ratification of both agreements on 20 March 2006.

TRADE POLICY

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia - Steel products

The Council adopted a regulation in order to implement decision 1/2007 of the joint EU-FYROM stabilisation and association council, approving the abolition of the double-checking system for the import into the Community of steel products originating in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The regulation will apply as from 1 February 2008 (14070/2/07).

EU-Japan cooperation agreement in customs matters

The Council adopted a decision approving the conclusion of an agreement with Japan on cooperation and mutual administrative assistance in customs matters (9424/4/07).

The agreement aims to ensure effective cooperation between the customs authorities of the EU and Japan in order to balance trade liberalisation and trade facilitation and to better combat fraud and other illegal activities.

Preferential proofs of origin

The Council adopted a regulation amending regulation 1207/2001 in order to ensure correct indication of the origin of materials used in the manufacture in the Community of originating products (16558/07).

Regulation 1207/2001 lays down provisions to support the correct issue or making out of proofs of origin for exports of products from the Community in the context of its preferential trade relations with certain third countries.

GENERAL AFFAIRS

Proceedings in the Council's different configurations

The Council took note of a report from the presidency on proceedings in its different configurations (5482/08).

TRANSPORT

EU/China - Agreement on maritime transport

The Council adopted a decision approving the conclusion of an agreement with China on maritime transport, after completion of the necessary constitutional and institutional procedures (15882/1/07). The agreement was signed in Brussels in December 2002.

The agreement is aimed at improving the conditions under which respective maritime cargo transport operations are carried out between the EU, China and third countries. It is based on the principles of freedom to provide maritime transport services, free access to cargoes and cross trades, unrestricted access to, and non-discriminatory treatment in, the use of ports and auxiliary services as well as regarding commercial presence.

In addition, the Council adopted a decision approving the conclusion of a protocol amending the agreement in order to take account of the accession to the EU of ten new member states in May 2004 (5125/08). The protocol was signed in Beijing in September 2005.

ENVIRONMENT

United Nations forum on forests - *Council conclusions*

The Council adopted conclusions to be found in document 5553/08.

TRANSPARENCY

Public access to documents

The Council adopted:

- the reply to confirmatory application 17/c/01/07 (16304/07);
- the reply to confirmatory application 18/c/01/07, the Czech, Danish, Finnish and Swedish delegations voting against (16630/07).

APPOINTMENTS

Committee of the Region

On a proposal from the Spanish government, the Council adopted a Decision appointing

- Mr Iñaki AGUIRRE ARIZMENDI, Secretario General de Acción Exterior, Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco, and
- Mr Julio César FERNÁNDEZ MATO, Secretario General de Relaciones Exteriores, Comunidad Autónoma de Galicia.

as alternate members for the remainder of the current term of office, ending on 25 January 2010.
