



Brussels, 25 April 2008

BACKGROUND¹

GENERAL AFFAIRS and EXTERNAL RELATIONS COUNCIL

Tuesday 29 April in Luxembourg

*Starting at 10.00, the Council will focus on external relations, including **Burma/Myanmar, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Pakistan and the Middle East.***

*At lunch, ministers will, among other things, discuss the situation in **Western Balkans.***

Press conference: *at the end of the Council, as from +/- 15.00.*

Press conferences and public events can be followed by video streaming:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/videostreaming>

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In the margins of the Council:

Monday 28 April:

11.00 EU-Egypt Association Council, with press conference at +/- 13.30;

15.00 Troika meeting with the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas);

15.00 Troika meeting with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe;

18.00 EU-Croatia Stabilisation and Association Council, with press conference at +/- 19.30.

Tuesday 29 April:

18.30 Troika meeting with Russia, with press conference at +/- 19.30.

¹ This note has been drawn up under the responsibility of the press office

SESSION ON EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Zimbabwe

The Council will discuss the situation in Zimbabwe. It is expected to express concern over the delay in announcing the result of the presidential elections held on 29 March, as well as at reports of intimidation, human rights abuses and violence, considering these to be politically motivated attacks against supporters of democratic change.

It will highlight the role to be played by other countries in the region, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Union in resolving the crisis in Zimbabwe, and commend the holding of an extraordinary SADC summit in Lusaka on 13 April.

The Council will continue to closely monitor the situation, and to explore the options for increasing pressure on those who direct and engage in state-sponsored violence and intimidation.

It is expected to adopt conclusions along these lines.

Middle East

The Council will review the situation in the Middle East, assessing prospects for the Annapolis process (launched in November 2007) and for the follow-up to the Paris donors' conference (December 2007).

The discussion will take place ahead of meetings of the ad hoc liaison committee and the Quartet on 2 May in London, and of the Palestine investment conference at the end of May in Bethlehem.

Iraq

The Council will review the situation regarding Iraq, following the international conference in Kuwait on 22 April to promote Iraq's economy, security and diplomatic ties, and with preparations for a second "international compact with Iraq" meeting in Stockholm on 29 May.

Meeting in Brussels on 16 April, EU High Representative Javier Solana and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki agreed to continue strengthening relations in all fields, in particular reconstruction, energy and support to refugees. They recalled the important role to be played by neighbouring countries in contributing to the stability of Iraq and the whole region. They also underlined the importance of the Kuwait and Stockholm meetings for the future of Iraq.

In a declaration of 22 April, the EU welcomed the holding of the international conference in Kuwait. It reaffirmed its strong support for the neighbouring countries' process and underlined the mutual benefits of continuing dialogue and co-operation between Iraq, its neighbours and the international community. The EU also urged all partners in the region to contribute to the political stabilisation and reconstruction of Iraq by implementing commitments made through the neighbours' process and other mechanisms.

Pakistan

The Council will review recent developments in Pakistan. High Representative Javier Solana will report on his visit to Islamabad on 22 April.

The Council is expected to welcome progress made in the democratic process in Pakistan, and to note that the 18 February elections, generally seen as competitive and having achieved increased public confidence, have provided Pakistan and the EU with new opportunities to improve and deepen their relations.

In this context, the Council is expected to outline prospects for these relations, with particular focus on economic development and trade, non-proliferation, countering terrorism, the strengthening of democratic institutions, human rights, migration, education, inter-cultural issues and regional cooperation, as well as issues of broader international importance.

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions along these lines.

Burma/Myanmar

The Council will discuss the situation in Burma/Myanmar. It is expected to express continued concern and again to urge the authorities to take rapid steps for transition to a legitimate, civilian government and for national reconciliation.

The Council is expected to underline that only a process that involves the full participation of all stakeholders in the country will lead to national reconciliation and stability, and that therefore the draft constitution, referendum and elections, as currently conceived, will not address the many problems facing Burma/Myanmar. It should notably call on the authorities to allow a free and open debate on the constitution prior to the referendum on 10 May, to guarantee that the referendum will be free and fair as well as to invite international monitoring, and to urge the authorities to ensure that the political process is transparent.

The Council should recall the EU's unwavering commitment to the welfare of the people of Burma/Myanmar, as reflected in the substantial assistance provided by the EU and its member states.

It is also due to decide on the renewal of restrictive measures targeted against those responsible for human rights abuses and the lack of development in Burma/Myanmar.

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions along these lines.

Western Balkans

Ministers, over lunch, will discuss the situation in the Western Balkans, notably in the run-up to the Serbian general elections on 11 May.

The Council is also expected to adopt conclusions on:

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH):

- welcoming the conclusion of the first phase of police reform with the recent adoption of two police laws, and recalling that agreement on police reform in line with the EU's principles is one of the necessary conditions for further progress towards the conclusion of a stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) with the EU;
- highlighting the importance of the future SAA as the essential framework for relations between the EU and BiH, and encouraging all political forces in BiH to unite their efforts in pursuing with determination its reform agenda, including the priorities set out in the European partnership;
- calling on the Commission to launch a dialogue on visas with BiH as soon as possible.

Commission communication on the Western Balkans:

- welcoming the Commission's communication: "Western Balkans: enhancing the European perspective", which was used as a basis for discussions at the informal EU foreign ministers' meeting ("Gymnich") and the EU-Western Balkans Forum at Brdo (Slovenia) on 29 March;
- underlining progress achieved in recent years through the EU-Western Balkans stabilisation and association process, and the need to make the European perspective tangible and more visible to people across the Western Balkans;
- welcoming steps such as the launch of a dialogue on visa liberalisation, and the Commission's intention to further increase the number of scholarships granted to students from the Western Balkans.

Other business

- *European neighbourhood policy*

The Commission, at lunch, will present a communication on recent progress regarding European neighbourhood policy action plans.

- *Georgia*

The Council, at lunch, will hold an exchange of views on recent developments with regard to Georgia.

- *Maritime piracy*

The Council will hold an exchange of views regarding recent incidents of piracy off the coast of Somalia, with a view to assessing how the EU could contribute to an international, UN-led response to this scourge.

Other items

The Council is also expected to adopt a number of other items, including:

- Uzbekistan: decision on an extension of the suspension of some restrictive measures; Council conclusions.
 - Relations with Russia: Council negotiating directives for a new agreement to provide a comprehensive framework for EU-Russia relations.
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