



Brussels, 7 March 2008

BACKGROUND¹

GENERAL AFFAIRS and EXTERNAL RELATIONS COUNCIL

Monday 10 March 2008 in Brussels

*The Council will start at 10.00 with a discussion on the state of play in negotiations on the **WTO's Doha Development Agenda**. A session on general affairs will follow, featuring preparations for the spring meeting of the **European Council (13 and 14 March)**. The session on external relations will resume, focusing on the **Middle East, Zimbabwe and Georgia**.*

*Lunch discussion items will include the **Western Balkans and Iran**.*

Press conference: *at the end of the Council (as from 15.00).*

Press conferences and public events can be followed by video streaming:
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In the margins of the Council:

Monday 10 March:

- 17.30: "Quadripartite" meeting with the Council of Europe;
- 19.15: EU-Algeria Association Council *(to be followed by a press conference at +/- 20.10);*

Tuesday 11 March:

- 09.00: Ministerial troika meeting with Albania *(followed by a press conference at +/- 11.00);*
- 12.00: EU-Ukraine Cooperation Council *(to be followed by a press conference at +/- 14.30).*

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

SESSION ON GENERAL AFFAIRS

Preparation of the spring meeting of the European Council

The Council will examine draft conclusions prepared by the presidency for the spring meeting of the European Council, to be held in Brussels on 13 and 14 March.

It will also prepare discussion by the European Council of the impact of climate change on international security and stability. This issue is the subject of a paper prepared by High Representative Javier Solana with the Commission, following an invitation by the European Council in June last year.

The European Council's agenda is as follows:

- launch of a new three-year cycle, for the 2008-10 period, of the EU's Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs;
- preparation of an integrated climate change and energy policy;
- the stability of financial markets.

As regards the Lisbon strategy, the main emphasis of the new three-year cycle will be on implementation and delivery of reforms, given that it is now considered to be delivering on its objectives. The current priorities, agreed at the 2006 spring European Council, continue to be valid. And whilst evolving challenges need to be addressed, economic and employment guidelines are seen not to need an overhaul. The European Council will stress the importance of investment in knowledge and innovation, unlocking the business potential, particularly of SMEs, investment in people and the modernisation of labour markets.

Concerning climate and energy policy, the European Council will reiterate its commitment to deliver on the ambitious goals set last year. It should also confirm its international leadership in this area, working towards an ambitious and comprehensive post-2012 agreement.

As regards the stability of financial markets, the European Council will reaffirm its readiness to act, although recognising that financial systems, after the turbulences of last summer, remain fragile. In order to ensure greater stability in financial markets, transparency needs to be strengthened.

The European Council will also review the international situation if necessary.

SESSION ON EXTERNAL RELATIONS

WTO/Doha Development Agenda

Following an informal meeting of trade ministers in Brussels on Sunday evening, the Council will discuss the state of play in negotiations on the WTO's Doha Development Agenda (DDA), ahead of possible WTO ministerial discussions in Geneva and on the basis of an update by the Commission. The Council is expected to reiterate the crucial importance that the EU has attached to the DDA negotiations since their inception in 2001, and to recall the substantial contribution that the EU has made throughout.

The EU has consistently highlighted the importance of achieving a comprehensive, ambitious and balanced final outcome within and across all areas covered by the DDA, in agriculture and "nama" (non-agricultural market access) and also including services, rules, trade facilitation and geographical indications, in conformity with negotiating directives defined in Council conclusions. It has also regularly expressed its commitment to a successful result that meets the EU's main objectives and the needs and interests of developing countries, in particular less developed countries.

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions.

Middle East

The Council will, in the light of the latest developments in the region, discuss the situation in the Middle East. Regarding the Middle East peace process, the Council should reiterate its full support for the Annapolis process. High Representative Javier Solana is expected to brief ministers on his visit to the Middle East (2 to 5 March). The Council is also expected to discuss the continuing stalemate in Lebanon.

Zimbabwe

The Council will discuss the situation in Zimbabwe, ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for 29 March.

It is expected to express continued concern about the humanitarian, political and economic situation in Zimbabwe and conditions on the ground, which may endanger the holding of free and fair elections. It should note in particular that no formal invitation has been made to the European Union to send an official EU observation mission.

The Council is expected to urge the government to ensure that the elections meet international norms and standards. It should commend long-standing efforts led on behalf of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) by President Thabo Mbeki in order to improve relations between the government and the opposition, and call on SADC countries to remain actively engaged.

The Council is also expected to recall the EU's continued commitment to the people of Zimbabwe. The EU remains the most important donor to Zimbabwe. Its targeted restrictive measures (visa ban, assets freeze and arms embargo) are exclusively aimed at those leaders responsible for Zimbabwe's crisis of governance and human rights' abuses.

The Council is due to adopt conclusions along these lines.

Georgia

The Council is expected to discuss the situation in Georgia, as well as EU-Georgia relations, following the political crisis of last November and the presidential elections on 5 January, and ahead of parliamentary elections in May.

Western Balkans

At lunch, ministers will discuss the situation in the Western Balkans in the light of the developments since their last meeting.

On 18 February, the Council, in particular:

- noted that member states – following the adoption on 17 February by the Kosovo Assembly of a resolution declaring Kosovo to be independent – will decide, in accordance with national practice and international law, on their relations with Kosovo;
- recalled the EU's longstanding commitment to the stability of the Western Balkans region and reiterated its readiness to play a leading role in strengthening stability in the region;
- reaffirmed its commitment to fully and effectively support the European perspective for the Western Balkans.

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions focusing on:

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, noting the outcome of the latest session of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) steering board, held in Brussels on 26-27 February, in particular the PIC steering board's unanimous decision that the office of the High Representative will remain in place and continue to carry out its mandate under the Dayton/Paris peace agreement until necessary objectives and conditions are met. The Council should also note that Bosnia and Herzegovina has made progress with regard to the stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) with the EU, and urge the BiH authorities to make further efforts to ensure swift and effective fulfilment of all four conditions necessary for signing the SAA.
- **Regional cooperation**, welcoming the successful outcome of the joint meeting of the final regional table of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and the inaugural meeting of the Regional Co-operation Council (RCC) on 27 February in Sofia, which marked the formal handover from the Stability Pact to the RCC.

Iran

The second item for the lunch discussion is Iran. Ministers will discuss the nuclear issue, following the latest report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the adoption on 3 March of a third resolution by the UN Security Council.

Security Council resolution 1803 imposes additional sanctions against Iran, including inspection of cargo suspected of carrying prohibited goods, tighter monitoring of financial institutions and the extension of travel bans and asset freezes. In addition, the resolution bans the trade and supply of “dual-use” items, materials and technologies that can be adapted for military as well as civilian purposes. Travel bans have been imposed on an extra five Iranian officials and 12 Iranian companies face having their assets frozen, while all states are asked to step up their monitoring of financial institutions on their territories that have dealings with banks based in Iran, particularly Bank Melli and Bank Saderat.

In a statement, the foreign ministers of China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, with the support of the EU High Representative, deplored Iran's continued failure to comply with the requirements of the UN Security Council and IAEA board, in particular by expanding its enrichment-related activities.

At the same time they expressed their continued commitment to an early negotiated solution of the Iranian nuclear issue and reaffirmed their commitment to a dual-track approach. They reconfirmed proposals presented to Iran in June 2006 and expressed their readiness to further develop them. They urged Iran to take this opportunity to engage and to find a negotiated way forward. Noting that this will require further diplomatic efforts and innovative approaches, they asked High Representative Javier Solana to meet Dr. Saeed Jalili, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, and to address the interests and concerns of both sides in a manner which can gradually create the conditions for the opening of negotiations.

Other items

The Council will adopt a number of other items without discussion. These include:

- **Pakistan:** Conclusions on the parliamentary and provincial elections on 18 February as an important step in the democratic development of Pakistan, and on the EU's continued commitment to support Pakistan in building a prosperous and stable society, based on the principles of democracy, the rule of law and human rights.
- **Afghanistan:** Conclusions reaffirming the EU's commitment to long-term support for the people and government of Afghanistan, in the context of preparations for an international conference to be held in Paris in June to review progress in implementation of the Afghanistan "compact". The Council should also welcome the progress of the EU police mission in Afghanistan towards full deployment at central, provincial and regional level by the end of March.
