Resolution on the "Prestige" oil tanker disaster off the coast of Galicia, Spain

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The Council took note of a statement by the Spanish delegation on the accident involving the sinking of the outdated single-hull oil tanker "Prestige" on 19 November 2002 off the coast of Galicia. The Spanish delegation drew the Council's attention to the major environmental, social and economic damages caused to the region as a result of this catastrophe. Following this statement, the Portuguese delegation intervened on the same matter emphasising the serious consequences of the accident for Galicia and the Northern coastal regions of Portugal. It underscored the importance for the Union to respond in a well co-ordinated and effective fashion to these accidents. The French delegation joined in the concerns expressed by the Spanish and Portuguese delegations and called upon Member States and the Commission to develop new opportunities for exchange of information at European level on matters of marine security and emphasised the need for the Union to be very firm in condemning this kind of "environmental crimes". Several delegations expressed their solidarity with those areas and populations affected by this disaster. The Commission voiced its consternation for the environmental damage caused by the accident and stated its will to promote preventive measures in the area of marine security. In the context of the discussion, the Council adopted the following conclusions: - underlines the necessity to adopt additional measures to reduce the risks and to minimize and repair the damage in case such accident has taken place; - invites the Commission immediately to establish, in cooperation with the Member States concerned, an expert team to help coordinating the assistance offered by the Member States and to examine the long term effects of the damage resulting from the oil slick as well as from the remaining oil in the wreck while taking into account the flow of marine currents and to assess what measures can be taken in order to avoid further environmental damage in the future due to the oil still remaining in the wreck; - urges the Member States to have in place all necessary operational capabilities, such as specialised towage and recovery vessels, in order to respond directly to threats to the environment as a consequence of accidents with oil tankers and to encourage cooperation between Member States to this effect; - proposes the examination of a common mechanism by which the oil companies and shipping companies used by them, shipowners, charterers and insurance companies provide the means, not only to prevent, but also to efficiently combat possible ecological disasters such as those caused by ERIKA and PRESTIGE; - recalls the need to apply appropriately to maritime transport the precautionary principle, the principle that environmental damages should be rectified at the source, and the polluter-pays principle; - invites the Commission to examine possibilities offered by the Regulation of the Council of 11 November 2002 establishing the European Union Solidarity Fund1 for funding the cleaning-up of disaster stricken areas, including natural zones, for actions not covered by other funds; - stresses the importance of ensuring the participation of the EU candidate countries as well as other neighbouring countries,including Russia, in particular in the efforts to protect natural habitats and biodiversity, especially through participation in the banning of single-hull tankers carrying heavy grades of oil; - urges the Commission and the Member States to identify further measures regarding the implementation and strengthening of environmental legislation at national, EU or international level with a view to preventing environmental dangers arising from accidents relating to ships transporting hazardous substances, including the issue of the environmental liability and to fully restoring, in case accidents occur, the ecological losses and the environmental damages. The Council agrees to establish a European network of exchange of experience in matters of pollution by hydrocarbons. Furthermore, it commits itself to take all measures within its power to prevent accidents such as those of the PRESTIGE from occurring again and to reinforce the combat against criminal behaviour such as in the cleaning of tanks.