European neighbourhood policy

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The Council adopted the following conclusions on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) :

Firstly, it reaffirms the special role of this policy for the European Union's external relations, offering the possibility of increased political, security, economic and cultural cooperation between the European Union and its neighbours. The Council confirms its desire for the European Union's commitment in the Mediterranean, Eastern European and South Caucasus regions to be carried forward.

Equally, the Council reaffirms the importance that the European Union attaches to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Georgia and Lebanon as neighbours and partners. The EU hopes that these five countries will maintain close links with the Union, on the basis of common values of democracy, the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, including the freedom of the media, and common interests, as defined in the framework of the ENP.

The Council welcomed the Commission communication on European Neighbourhood Policy, as well as the national reports for the five countries, drawn up in close cooperation with the SG/HR. It endorsed the main thrust of these documents and thought they would form an excellent basis for further development of the ENP. The national reports give a clear and accurate account of the progress made by each country, but also of the challenges to be taken up by each of them both in political and in economic and social terms. These reports, pointing out the priorities for action which the Union would like to pursue with those five countries, form the basis on which the European Union should be able to enter into joint preparations for the ENP action plans.

The Council notes that the Commission has already begun discussions to prepare an action plan jointly with Egypt and Lebanon. The timetable for consultations with Lebanon will be determined by the development of the internal political situation in that country.

The Council notes that Member States will be kept fully informed of the progress of those consultations. The Council notes the Commission's intention to finalise the ENP action plans as far as possible by the end of 2005. The Association or Cooperation Councils concerned will be invited to approve the action plans after their adoption by the Council. The action plans should run for a minimum period of three years and be renewable by common agreement. Their implementation will be monitored in the framework of the institutions provided for in the relevant Association or Cooperation Agreements. The Council reiterates that the structures laid down for the Agreements in question should, if necessary, be re-examined so that all the priorities set out in the framework of the ENP are duly taken into account.

The Council believes the action plans will prove to be useful tools by means of which the European Union will be able to strengthen its relations with the countries in question and actively encourage the necessary rapprochements.

The Council stresses that the ENP action plans to be negotiated with each of the partners will be on a level of intensity and ambition reflecting the real extent to which common values are shared, the state of relations with each country, its needs and capabilities, and common interests. The Council also notes that possible difficulties which could arise in the joint preparation of an action plan with a partner should not impede the adoption of action plans with the others.

With regard to the South Caucasus countries, particular attention will be paid to encouraging regional cooperation and progress in conflict resolution. On this point, the Council welcomes the determination

expressed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to use the action plans as essential instruments for strengthening regional cooperation. The Council notes with satisfaction the recent ratification of the Association Agreement by the Algerian Parliament and notes the Commission's intention to draw up a national report on Algeria.

In conclusion, the ENP, including the action plans which will start being negotiated with the five neighbouring countries, is tangible proof of the EU's desire to continue strengthening its commitment in the regions of Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and the Mediterranean and to help the countries of those regions to attain a significant degree of economic integration and enhance their political cooperation. The Council wants the action plans to become a solid platform enabling progress to be made on that path, in the interest of the parties and in accordance with common strategic priorities.