



Brussels, 17 March 2006

DRAFT

BACKGROUND ¹

GENERAL AFFAIRS and EXTERNAL RELATIONS COUNCIL

Monday 20 March in Brussels

The Council will start at 10:00 hrs with a session on general affairs, featuring preparations for the European Council meeting on 23 and 24 March.

*A session on external relations will follow, focusing on the **Western Balkans, Iran, Iraq** and the Doha **world trade** negotiations. At lunch, ministers will discuss the situation in the **Middle East** and in **Sudan** and may also discuss the situation in **Belarus** after the 19 March presidential election. They will also meet with the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Fouad Siniora.*

The presidency will hold a press conference at the end of the meeting.

At 13:00, the president of the Council will inaugurate the exhibition "Austria in Europe" in the Council's Justus Lipsius building.

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In the margins of the Council:

Monday 20 March:

18:00 EU-Romania association council;

Tuesday 21 March:

11:00 EU troika meeting with Albania, *to be followed by a press opportunity.*

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¹ This note was prepared under the responsibility of the press office.

SESSION ON GENERAL AFFAIRS

Preparation of the spring European Council - Lisbon strategy on growth and jobs

The Council will examine draft conclusions prepared by the presidency for the European Council meeting to be held in Brussels on 23 and 24 March.

The European Council is due to focus on its annual review of the strategy for growth and jobs that it laid down at Lisbon in March 2000 and re-launched last spring.

The presidency's intention is for the European Council to highlight the need to implement commitments on jobs and growth entered into last year, and to identify priority actions to be implemented before the end of 2007, thus enabling a second phase of the Lisbon strategy to be launched in the spring of 2008.

SESSION ON EXTERNAL RELATIONS

World trade – Doha Development Agenda

The Council will be briefed by the Commission on recent developments and the prospects for further progress in the current round of trade negotiations under the World Trade Organisation's Doha Development Agenda, following ministerial meetings held by a number of WTO members in London on 12-13 March.

The Council has, on a number of occasions, asserted the need for a balanced outcome to all the main items on the Doha agenda - with specific focus on the needs of developing countries - and for all partners to make contributions commensurate with their level of development.

At the end of the WTO ministerial conference at Hong Kong in December, the Council approved the WTO ministerial declaration whilst highlighting the EU's determination to ensure an ambitious and balanced outcome to the following stages of the negotiations in 2006.

Western Balkans

The Council will discuss the situation in the Western Balkans and is expected to adopt conclusions focusing on:

- **The follow-up to the informal EU-Western Balkans Foreign Ministers meeting in Salzburg** on 11 March 2006, the outcome of which it will welcome. It is expected to underline its determination to fully implement the commitments given in the Thessaloniki agenda, to welcome the Commission's Communication "The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity" and to express its intention to take forward its implementation.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** progress made on the negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement since the opening of negotiations in November 2005 and conditions for further progress, including achieving full co-operation with the ICTY; progress made in talks on constitutional reform, the successful outcome of which would make the country's institutions more functional and better able to comply with European standards.

- **Serbia and Montenegro:** the Council is expected to express support for the Serbian people in their quest to come to terms with the legacy of the Milosevic regime. It should also recall its conclusions of 27 February that full cooperation with the ICTY must be achieved to ensure that the SAA negotiations are not disrupted, and that Serbia and Montenegro needs to take decisive action to ensure that all remaining fugitive ICTY indictees, notably Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, are brought to justice.

Iran

The Council will discuss ongoing developments, including at the level of the UN Security Council, concerning Iran's nuclear programme.

It is expected to reiterate the EU's deep concern at Iran's continuing failure to cooperate fully with the IAEA and to take the steps necessary to re-establish international confidence in the peaceful purpose of its nuclear programme, and to reaffirm the EU's continued commitment to a diplomatic solution.

On 4 February the IAEA Board of Governors decided by an overwhelming majority that the issue of Iran's nuclear programme should be reported to the UN Security Council. As a result of Iran's failure to implement in full the measures deemed necessary by the IAEA Board, the Security Council is currently considering appropriate steps.

The Council should also underline the need for Iran to address effectively all the EU's areas of concern which include terrorism, Iran's approach to the Middle East peace process, regional issues as well as respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Iraq

The Council is expected to discuss the situation in Iraq and prospects for the development of EU-Iraq relations, notably envisaged negotiations on a trade and cooperation agreement.

Middle East

At lunch, ministers will discuss the situation in the Middle East peace process, against the background of the process of formation of a Palestinian government. At their informal meeting in Salzburg last week, ministers reviewed the situation regarding EU aid to the Palestinians. A meeting of the Quartet envoys was held in Brussels on 16 March.

Ministers will also discuss the situation in **Lebanon** and will meet with Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

Following that meeting the Council is expected to adopt conclusions on the launching of the national dialogue and its continuation. Reiterating its support for Lebanon's unity, stability and independence, it is expected to condemn the violent attacks on Lebanese citizens, journalists and political leaders and to express concern at continued intimidation and attacks against the right to freedom of expression.

The Council should also reaffirm its full support for the UN International Investigation Commission

into the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, as mandated by UNSCR 1595 and 1644 and urge all parties to co-operate unconditionally with the UNIIC.

The Council will also review the forthcoming development of EU-Lebanon relations, in the perspective of the convening of the first Association Council with Lebanon and of the opening of negotiations on the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plan for Lebanon.

Sudan

The Council will discuss Sudan and will reaffirm its support for a peaceful, democratic and prosperous Sudan based on the successful implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and on a political solution to the conflict in Darfur.

It is expected to welcome the decisions of the African Union's Peace and Security Council of 10 March, which engaged the parties to the conflict to expedite the peace negotiations in Abuja with a view to concluding a peace agreement by the end of April 2006 and which extended the mandate of AMIS until 30 September 2006 and set a framework for a transition from AMIS to a UN operation in Darfur. The AU decision will allow all stakeholders, including the EU, to assist both the AU and the UN in a successful transition.

Talks on Darfur involving representatives of the EU, the African Union, the US and Sudan were held in Brussels on 8 March at the invitation of HR Solana. In this regard, the Council is expected to stress that every effort has to be made to speed up the Abuja peace process and to underline its readiness to step up EU assistance in this regard.

Items to be adopted without debate

Somalia - The Council is due to adopt conclusions on the Somali reconciliation and peace process and the EU's policy in support of this process.
