



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



6729/09 (Presse 48)

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PRESS RELEASE

2926th Council meeting

General Affairs and External Relations

External relations

Brussels, 23 February 2009

President

Karel SCHWARZENBERG

Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

P R E S S

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Main results of the Council

*The Council reaffirmed its commitment in **Afghanistan** and will continue to examine how to enhance European support to the people and government of Afghanistan.*

*As regards the **Middle East Peace Process**, the Council prepared the EU's input for the international conference on Gaza reconstruction which will be held in Sharm al-Sheikh (Egypt) next 2 March 2009.*

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OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

none

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- Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
- Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's Internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
- Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's Internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

PARTICIPANTS

The Governments of the Member States and the European Commission were represented as follows:

Belgium:

Mr Karel DE GUCHT
Mr Olivier CHASTEL

Minister for Foreign Affairs
State Secretary for Foreign Affairs with responsibility for preparing for the EU Presidency, attached to the Minister for Foreign Affairs

Bulgaria:

Mr Ivailo Georgiev KALFIN

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs

Czech Republic:

Mr Alexandr VONDRA

Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for European Affairs

Mr Karel SCHWARZENBERG

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Denmark:

Mr Per Stig MØLLER

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Germany:

Mr Frank-Walter STEINMEIER

Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs

Estonia:

Mr Urmas PAET

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Ireland:

Mr Michael MARTIN

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Greece:

Mr Ioannis VALINAKIS

State Secretary for Foreign Affairs

Spain:

Mr Diego LÓPEZ GARRIDO

State Secretary for the European Union

France:

Mr Bernard KOUCHNER
Mr Bruno LE MAIRE

Minister for Foreign and European Affairs
Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs

Italy:

Mr Franco FRATTINI

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Cyprus:

Mr Nicholas EMILIOU

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Latvia:

Mr Māris RIEKSTIŅŠ

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Lithuania:

Mr Vygaudas UŠACKAS

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Luxembourg:

Mr Jean ASSELBORN

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Immigration

Hungary:

Ms Kinga GÖNCZ

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Malta:

Mr Richard CACHIA CARUANA

Permanent Representative

Netherlands:

Mr Frans TIMMERMANS

Minister for European Affairs

Austria:

Mr Michael SPINDELEGGER

Federal Minister for European and International Affairs

Poland:

Mr Radosław SIKORSKI

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Portugal:

Mr Luis AMADO

Ministro de Estado, Minister for Foreign Affairs

Romania:

Mr Cristian DIACONESCU

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Slovenia:

Mr Samuel ŽBOGAR

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mr Mitja GASPARI

Minister without Portfolio Responsible for Development and European Affairs

Slovakia:

Mr Miroslav LAJČÁK

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Finland:

Mr Alexander STUBB

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Ms Astrid THORS

Minister for Migration and European Affairs

Sweden:

Mr Carl BILDT

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Ms Cecilia MALMSTRÖM

Minister for European Affairs

United Kingdom:

Ms Caroline FLINT

Minister of State for Europe

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Commission:

Mr Olli REHN

Member

Ms Benita FERRERO-WALDNER

Member

Mr Andris PIEBALGS

Member

.....

General Secretariat of the Council:

Mr Javier SOLANA

Secretary-General/High Representative for the CFSP

ITEMS DEBATED

AFGHANISTAN

The Council discussed the directions for EU policy in the coming months regarding Afghanistan. The debate focused in particular on the planned Afghan elections in August, the EU's policy and its cooperation with other partners, in particular the US, as well as EU activities such as the EU's police mission to Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan). After the debate, the Presidency summarised the discussion along the following lines.

Ministers agreed that now was the right time to examine urgent options for increasing European support to the people and government of Afghanistan. The process of reviewing the EU's contributions in Afghanistan should focus both on short-term and long-term perspectives.

Ministers recognised the challenges and opportunities facing Afghanistan over the next 12-18 months, particularly the forthcoming elections, which are essential to the further political development of Afghanistan and the legitimacy of the next Government. Ministers underscored that the EU had an important role to play in both funding the elections and deploying a substantial election observation mission across the country.

Ministers highlighted the EU's support for the coordinating role of the UN's assistance mission in Afghanistan, including in the elections.

Ministers reiterated their commitment to expand EUPOL police mission as part of the EU's strategy. They underscored the importance of ensuring EU efforts complemented those of other international actors. Apart from EUPOL, the EU should be open to identify other areas where it can offer an added value, including on governance and the rule of law.

Ministers agreed on the importance of the broader regional context and the importance of positive engagement by neighbouring countries and other stakeholders in Afghanistan. The regionally-owned approach should better address some of the challenges, particularly on counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and trade.

Ministers reiterated their strong will to find, together with the US, ways of ensuring a common approach to effectively implementing solutions conducive for building a stronger and safer Afghanistan

The EU already makes a substantial collective contribution to Afghanistan. Since 2001, the EU (European Community and member states combined) has been one of the key donors supporting development in Afghanistan. Collectively, it pledged EUR 8 billion for reconstruction during the 2001-10 period. Contributions made public at the London conference in spring 2006 by the member states and the Commission accounted for EUR 2 billion. The Commission has pledged EUR 700 million for Afghanistan from 2007 to 2010, and the member states currently provide about half of ISAF troops (26 000 troops).

MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

The Council discussed the situation regarding the Middle East peace process, following the Israeli parliamentary elections held on 10 February.

The discussion focused on preparations for the international conference in support of the Palestinian economy for the reconstruction of Gaza which will be held on 2 March in Sharm el-Sheikh (Egypt), in particular the input of the EU as a co-sponsor of the conference.

Ministers stressed that substantial pledges of assistance should be mobilised, and above all that life in Gaza should be brought back to normal as quickly as possible. A number of messages will also be sent to the conference: humanitarian relief for the people, support for Egypt and its ongoing mediation efforts, support for a resumption of the bilateral negotiations and confirmation of the Arab Peace initiative.

The EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Javier Solana, announced that he will be travelling to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian territories from 24 to 28 February 2009, a few days before the Conference.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Ministers discussed over lunch preparations for the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership, on the basis of input from the Presidency and the Commission (a presidency paper, a presidency progress report, and a communication from the Commission).

They reaffirmed the political commitment by the December 2008 European Council to establish the Eastern Partnership.

They also noted that there were a number of issues, such as visa liberalisation, the articulation between the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea Synergy, the participation of Third countries or the financing, which will require further discussion as part of the process of developing and implementing the Eastern Partnership.

The relevant Council bodies will now start working on preparations for the Spring European Council, which is expected to establish the Eastern Partnership.

The Eastern Partnership is a multinational forum formed by the EU member states and six eastern Europe and southern Caucasus states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. It is intended to facilitate the negotiation of free trade zones for services and agricultural products, as well as partnership agreements and visa agreements.

The High Representative Javier Solana briefed Ministers on his recent visit to Minsk.

WESTERN BALKANS

Ministers discussed over lunch the situation in Western Balkans, focusing on:

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** the situation in general and in particular the role of the EU's special representative,
- **Serbia,** including its cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the developments on the political stage in the country, and
- **Montenegro:** the current situation in the context of the election of 29 March 2009, and how to further proceed with its application for EU membership.
- **Kosovo:** recent events.

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

Some external relations items were adopted without debate at the 2925th meeting on General Affairs (6728/09).
