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REGIONS:

AFRICA

Eritrea

- ▶ **Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on political prisoners in Eritrea** (18/09/2007)

The European Union remains extremely concerned with the situation of political prisoners in Eritrea and would like to reiterate the main lines of the Declaration issued on the 18th September 2006 as, so far, the situation has not seen any positive developments.

On 18 September 2001 a group of eleven prominent members of Parliament and of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the only political party in Eritrea, was arrested. A few days later, 10 independent journalists were also arrested. Since then, other individuals have been arrested and detained incommunicado, with no charges and with their right to a due process suspended.

Despite repeated appeals by the International Community, including the EU, and several Governmental and non-governmental Human Rights bodies, these prisoners remain in detention, without having been charged with any offence, and without access to a free and fair trial. None has been brought before a magistrate, although Eritrean laws require this to be done within 48 hours.

The European Union is deeply concerned about these severe violations of basic human rights and urges the Government of the State of Eritrea to disclose evidence of their place of detention, detention conditions and health status. The European Union also urges the Government of the State of Eritrea to either bring charges against those detained and instruct a due and open process with legal representation or to unconditionally release them.

Furthermore, the EU urges the Government of the State of Eritrea to allow the families, legal representatives and medical doctors of their choice to have access to the prisoners. The Eritrean authorities should ensure that the treatment of these prisoners while in custody adheres to all the conditions set out in Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners, adopted by the UN General Assembly Resolution 45/11 of 14 December 1990.

As far as the EU is concerned, the welfare of the detainees is an important issue. The EU therefore would like to assess their situation and reiterates the request to allow the EU Heads of Mission in Asmara to visit those concerned.

http://www.ue2007.pt/UE/vEN/Noticias_Documentos/Declaracoes_PESC/20070918.htm

Sierra Leone

- ▶ **Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the Presidential elections in Sierra Leone** (21/09/2007)

The European Union welcomes the peaceful, orderly and transparent electoral process which has followed the Presidential Run-Off elections of 8 September, leading to the announcement of the final election results on 17 September. The EU congratulates His Excellency Ernest Bai Koroma upon his election as President of Sierra Leone and expresses its sincere wishes for future close cooperation and strengthened political dialogue between the new Government and the EU.

Furthermore the EU expresses its gratitude and admiration for the strong democratic commitment shown by the people of Sierra Leone during the entire electoral process. In this context the EU wishes to highlight the positive role played by key Sierra Leonean institutions, and in particular the National Electoral Commission (NEC).

The EU will be closely engaged in promoting a peaceful and prosperous future for Sierra Leone and its people.

http://www.eu2007.pt/UE/vEN/Noticias_Documentos/Declaracoes_PESC/20070921SerraLeoa.htm

AMERICAS

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MAGHREB AND MIDDLE EAST

Iran

- ▶ **Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the EU on the imminent execution of Mr Behnam Zare (11/09/2007).**

The EU is deeply concerned by the news of the imminent execution of Mr Behnam Zare, who was sentenced to death by a judge of the Shiraz Court for a crime committed when he was a minor.

The EU recalls the Islamic Republic of Iran's international commitments, and specifically the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, both clearly prohibiting the execution of minors or people who have been convicted of crimes committed while they were minors.

The EU urges the Islamic Republic of Iran to comply with International Law and to halt the execution of Mr Zare, and of all other juvenile offenders, taking in consideration alternative sentences for juvenile offenders.

The EU also calls on the Islamic Republic of Iran, in the advent of the month of Ramadan, to announce a temporary halt to all executions in order to initiate an urgent review of Islamic Republic of Iran's international position and to remind the Judiciary of Iran's international obligations

http://www.ue2007.pt/UE/vEN/Noticias_Documentos/Declaracoes_PESC/20070911.htm

Syria

- ▶ **EP delegation visit to Syria and the Iraqi refugees crisis(12/09/2007).**

The recent influx of 1.5 million Iraqi refugees places a huge strain on Syria, a problem not sufficiently realised by the international community, said the European Parliament delegation for relations with the countries of the Mashreq on Wednesday. The delegation, led by its Chair, Béatrice Patrie (PES, FR), is

visiting Syria for its 9th interparliamentary meeting, and gave a press conference in Damascus today on the results of its political meetings so far.

MEPs held political talks with Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, Foreign Minister Waleed Al Moallem, Vice Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah Dardari, as well as Parliament President Mahmoud Al Abrache and Foreign and Arab Affairs Committee Chair Suleiman Haddad, and the Governor of the Central Bank, Adib Al-Mayaleh. The main subjects discussed were the plight of Iraqi refugees in the country, the pending Association Agreement with the EU, political and economic reforms in the country, and the Middle East peace process.

The delegation will also meet with religious leaders for a cultural-religious dialogue in Aleppo, among them the Syrian Grand Mufti Ahmad Badr-Eddine Hassoun, Orthodox Archbishop Jean Ibrahim, Catholic Archbishop Antoine Odo and Protestant Reverend Harotian Sleimanian.

Iraqi refugees

Representatives of the Syrian government, parliamentarians and business leaders underlined the urgency of facing up to the economic and social consequences of the massive influx of refugees from Iraq. On 10 September, the Syrian government instituted new visa requirements for Iraqis, following the influx of 1.5 million Iraqi refugees to Syria in the past few years, fleeing sectarian violence. These refugees have increased Syria's population by 7%, putting ever-increasing stress on the country's health services and educational facilities, as well as threatening to destabilise the economy.

The EU responded to this crisis through the ECHO programme, and has already allocated € 4 million to organisations such as the UNHCR and the Dutch Red Cross, enabling them to extend their operations in Syria, and to provide basic health services. The delegation visited an ECHO-funded clinic in Sayda Zeinba, meeting both doctors and patients to discuss the programme's impact and challenges. Further EU assistance is envisaged for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and the EU has also pledged € 11 million for specific cooperation programmes in the fields of health and education services in Syria.

Even so, and despite efforts such as the April 2007 Geneva Conference, **more international aid is needed, and Chairwoman Patrie pledged to work to raise international awareness of the great strain that this vast migration flow has put on Syria's economic and social structures, and which may threaten the country's stability.**

EU-Syria association agreement

Syria and the European Union initialled an association agreement in October 2004, but it has yet to be signed. The delegation reminded its various interlocutors that the European Parliament is supportive of the agreement citing its resolution of 26 October 2006. The Members emphasised that the European Parliament has done its part, and that the responsibility to act now lies with the Council of Ministers. The delegation therefore called on the Council to put the agreement on its agenda, in line with Parliament's previous recommendations.

Domestic economic and political reform

At a meeting held by the Syrian Enterprise Business Centre (SEBC), Chairwoman Patrie reminded business leaders that Syria is in the midst of a difficult transformation from a planned economy to a social market model. She congratulated the government on the progress achieved so far, but the delegation nevertheless noted that much had yet to be done, such as establishing a legal framework for a market economy, including bankruptcy laws, a truly independent central bank and the creation of a private banking sector. **The delegation also stressed the importance of accelerating the pace of political and administrative reforms, and noted that serious shortcomings in guaranteeing human rights and fundamental freedoms still needed to be addressed.**

Middle East peace process

Chairwoman Patrie stressed the fact that Syria was an indispensable partner for any peaceful resolution of the many tensions in the Middle East. In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, violence in Iraq and

high political tension in Lebanon, she urged the Syrian government to contribute positively to efforts to stabilise this volatile region.

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress_page/030-10240-253-09-37-903-20070910IPR10224-10-09-2007-2007-false/default_en.htm

"Deep despair" was how one MEP described people's feelings after meeting just some of the 1.5 million Iraqi refugees who have fled to Syria. Driven by continued violence in their homeland and by close geographical and cultural links, **almost 2.5 million Iraqis are believed to have fled to Syria and Jordan**. A cross-party delegation of MEPs visited Damascus from 10-15 September to assess for themselves the refugee crises there and how the Syrian authorities are coping.

The visit came amid a recent imposition of visas on Iraqi refugees by Damascus. Prior to the 10 September visa deadline **it was estimated that 30,000 people were arriving every month. The influx has put immeasurable strain on the Syrian health, housing and school system as the population has jumped 7% due to the influx.**

Syrian schools and hospitals struggle to cope

The MEPs found that in particular the health system was under enormous strain. In July the country's Health Minister Maher Hosami told a World Health Organisation conference that the **health care cost for Iraqi refugees in Syria has reached \$60 million (€43.3 million)**. In addition the Syrian school system has had to raise the number of Iraqi students who are enrolled to 100,000 students. The current number of Iraqi children at school is some 32,000.

The refugees also suffer from poverty and unemployment as the arrivals struggle to find work once they arrive in Syria. This can lead to desperate measures as people try to feed themselves.

The nine MEPs who made up the delegation met with senior Syrian officials and religious leaders. Among the topics they discussed were the Association Agreement with the EU, political and economic reforms and the Middle East peace process. The delegation also visited hospitals where Iraqi refugees are being treated. What they saw and heard made a profound impression on them.

Health situation "desperate"

Béatrice Patrie - the French Socialist who headed the delegation - said that "the feeling that one could perceive in them was one of deep despair, especially since as their return to their homes is not going to happen tomorrow". UK MEP John Purvis (EPP-ED) described the situation as "desperate and rather pathetic" after visiting a hospital. He said "it was more a dispensary and consulting facility than a hospital" - despite the fact that serious illnesses were being treated there.

In terms of financial assistance the EU has allocated €4 million through ECHO - its Humanitarian Aid Office. A further €11 million has been pledged for specific health and education programmes. **Ms Patrie called for international financial assistance to be increased and said that the European Parliament would try and raise international awareness of the problems the refugees face.** Speaking of where moral blame for the crises lies, Mr Purvis said "it is rather hypocritical of us to expect Syria and Jordan to take the burden of the refugees".

Given the current situation, a return to Iraq for the refugees is not likely in the near future. One of the MEPs who was on the visit - Italian Socialist Pasqualina Napolitano - called for a "local solution" as the refugees are fleeing to Arabic countries and not trying to reach Europe. However, she warned that "the situation could become still more dramatic if we do not act immediately - because Syria has started to close the borders"

Internal refugees

The 2.5 million people who have fled Iraq is almost matched by the 2.2 million who are displaced internally - where they have fled violence for "safer" areas. This flight - often along religious and ethnic grounds has accelerated the increasing fragmentation of Iraq.

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public/story_page/030-10381-253-09-37-903-20070913STO10367-2007-10-09-2007/default_en.htm

Lebanon

- ▶ **EU Presidency Statement on the assassination of Lebanese MP Antoine Ghanem**
(19/09/2007).

The EU Presidency is deeply shocked and condemns in the strongest terms the attack perpetrated in Beirut's Christian district of Sin el-Fil, which claimed the life of the Lebanese Member of Parliament Antoine Ghanem and several others. The EU Presidency would like to convey its condolences and sympathy to the families of the victims.

The attack aims at destabilising Lebanon on the eve of Presidential elections. However, it should not weaken the Lebanese people's resolve to take a firm stand against violence. Those responsible for committing this hideous terrorist act must be promptly brought to justice. The Presidency urges all Lebanese parties and all actors in the region to refrain from any activities that would further endanger the political stability of Lebanon.

The EU Presidency reaffirms its strong support for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity, and political independence of Lebanon and urges all Lebanese parties to achieve a comprehensive compromise towards national reconciliation. The Presidency recalls that the country's political crisis can only be resolved through dialogue and in respect of its democratic and legitimate elected institutions.

<http://www.eu2007.pt/NR/exeres/478E9FF7-97B7-4C94-8737-933A0645A319.htm>

THEMATIC :

FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVES

JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS

Return of illegal immigrants

- ▶ **Civil Liberties Committee substantially amends proposal on forced return of illegal immigrants** (12/09/2007)

The Civil Liberties Committee on Wednesday voted over 200 binding amendments to a Commission proposal laying down common rules on the temporary custody and removal of illegal immigrants. . . **MEPs fixed a maximum "retention" (custody) period of 18 months and backed the use of coercive measures, case-by-case, to remove illegal immigrants or rejected asylum seekers. Returned immigrants may also be subject to an EU-wide re-entry ban.**

The aim of the draft directive, which will be the first serious attempt to create an EU common policy on return, is to eliminate marked differences in how Member States deal with the expulsion of immigrants and establish "fair and transparent" common rules on voluntary return, removal orders, use of coercive measures, temporary custody and a re-entry ban, whilst ensuring respect for the human rights of the persons concerned. The rapporteur was Manfred Weber (EPP-ED, DE).

The future directive promotes the principle of voluntary return by establishing a general rule that a "period for departure" should normally be granted. MEPs stressed that such period should be of "at least 4 weeks", unless a competent authority has objective reasons to believe the person will abscond.

A longer retention period

While individual decisions are taken on each removal case and the removal arrangements are in progress, the people concerned may be retained by authorities "in specialised temporary custody facilities". Following tough negotiations, MEPs finally agreed to fix "a period of three months after which temporary custody shall cease to be justified". Yet Member States may shorten or extend this period by "up to 18 months in cases in which in spite of all reasonable efforts, the removal operation is likely to last longer due to lack of co-operation on the part of the third-country national concerned or due to delays in obtaining the necessary documentation from third countries or if the person concerned represents a proven threat to public security". This paragraph amends the Commission's initial proposal, which was for a fixed maximum period of 6 months.

The directive also deals with the living conditions of people in temporary custody, and several of the amendments seek to ensure their right to medical assistance, family unity and education for children.

Unaccompanied minors should not be detained

MEPs decided that "unaccompanied minors should not be removed or detained" and also added new paragraphs to ensure that families accompanied by one or more minors will be given separate accommodation and "only be detained as a measure of last resort".

Re-entry ban

A key innovation of the directive is that forced removal orders might include an EU-wide re-entry ban valid for up to five years. MEPs stressed that such a ban should be provided for only as a possibility, to be decided upon by the Member State case by case, rather than mandatory, as the Commission had suggested.

Return and removal

The directive will also establish a harmonised two-step procedure which involves a return decision as a first step and, if necessary, the issuing of a removal order as a second step, thus to some extent aligning Member States' currently divergent systems. MEPs adopted several measures to establish minimum safeguards for the conduct of forced removal and to prevent collective expulsions.

Ombudsman for return

Finally, the Civil Liberties Committee added a provision for the appointment of a "European Parliament Ombudsman for Return" who will be entitled to conduct unannounced inspections, collect information on joint removals and ask Member States for clarifications.

Once the directive is adopted, Member States will have 18 months to bring it into effect.

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress_page/018-10237-254-09-37-902-20070910IPR10221-11-09-2007-2007-false/default_en.htm

EXTERNAL RELATIONS & DEVELOPMENT-RELATED ISSUES

EU / UN REFORM

MISCELLANEOUS

EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator

- ▶ **Eu Presidency statement on the appointment of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator** (19/09/2007)

The Presidency of the EU welcomes the appointment of **Mr Gilles de Kerchove as the new EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator**. Mr Kerchove has a distinguished European reputation and we welcome the flair and dedication he will bring to the role.

Countering terrorism is a key priority for the European Union and the action of Mr de Kerchove in coordinating the work of the Council and monitoring the implementation of the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy is essential to ensure that the Union does all it can to combat the scourge of terrorism.

Terrorism is a global threat and requires an international response. The EU stands ready to implement the UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy and to reach an agreement on the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. The new Counter-Terrorism Coordinator will play an important role in congregating EU efforts in ensuring these happen.

http://www.eu2007.pt/UE/vEN/Noticias_Documentos/20070919AcordoCECT.htm