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Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner to visit South Caucasus 16/17 February

European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, will make her first bilateral visit to the three countries of the South Caucasus on 16 and 17 February. Her visits to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia demonstrate the European Commission's commitment to lay the foundations for a deeper relationship between the EU and the South Caucasus, through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and to support these partner countries' own reform programmes. While visiting the capitals Yerevan, Baku and Tbilisi, Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner will meet with the Heads of State of all three countries (Presidents Kocharian, Aliyev and Saakashvili) as well as with leading politicians, including the respective Ministers for Foreign Affairs and the Speakers of Parliament in all three countries. She will discuss current consultations preparing ENP Action Plans with each country, the "frozen conflicts" in the region, and topical issues related to energy security.

On the eve of her visit, Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner said: "By including the countries of the South Caucasus in the ENP we have opened a new chapter in our relations with these countries. I hope that we can swiftly conclude our work together with Armenia, Azerbaijan and EU-Georgia on the Action Plans so that these relationships can intensify further. 2006 should be the year that takes our partnership up a gear".

She added: "I also hope that in 2006 we can see good progress on the peaceful settlement of the conflicts in the region. During my visit I will be explaining how we can support the countries on their way to a more stable, prosperous and democratic future. This process not only supports Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia individually, but brings benefits for the South Caucasus region as a whole".

The European Neighbourhood Policy is a unique agreement between the European Union and its neighbours. It aims to intensify relations and promote progressive integration, through the offer of a stake in the EU internal market. The ENP offers additional economic and social benefits for the countries that border the EU, through co-operation in a range of areas from strengthening democracy, promoting rule of law, and upholding human rights, to trade liberalisation, energy, and transport development.

The Action Plans for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia will build on their existing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with the EU. Consultations with each of the countries on their individual Action Plans were initiated late last year. Each plan is tailor-made to the country concerned.

The Commissioner's visit will provide further impetus to the consultations process. Her visit will be followed by further consultations between the EU and the South Caucasus countries with a view to finalise those Action Plans as soon as possible.

The EC is one of the main donors of assistance to the South Caucasus. Over the period 1991-2004, EC has allocated over €1.2 billion worth of assistance, with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia receiving an equal share of this envelope each (about €400 mio). Half of the assistance is geared towards poverty reduction and food security objectives. The balance was mainly provided through the TACIS programme and through macro-financial assistance. The TACIS programme (Technical Assistance CIS) provides support to legal and administrative reform, the development of trade, investment and a functioning market economy, rule of law and governance, democratic institutions and civil society. Humanitarian assistance, while very substantial in the early and mid nineties, has been gradually phased out.

For more information on the EU's relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/armenia/intro/index.htm

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/azerbaidjan/intro/index.htm

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/georgia/intro/index.htm