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PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Commission provisions on “ARGUS” general rapid alert system

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent crises, both natural (the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004) and man-made (Madrid 2004 and London 2005 terrorist attacks), as well as foreseeable threats to human health (Influenza Pandemic) have highlighted the need to strengthen the instruments ensuring effective and coordinated management of major multisectoral crises that require action at Community level. Although Member States have the primary responsibility for the response in case of an emergency, the Commission has a role to play. In the event of a crisis, the Commission may be called upon to act in its own domains of competence and to support the efforts of Member States. The cooperation within the Commission will facilitate mutual assistance in the event of a major disaster in the EU and assist Member States in the implementation of their solidarity commitment to third countries. The Commission must provide comprehensive and coherent information to the public and the media on the actions and efforts deployed, in a timely manner and through appropriate channels. This will contribute to a more effective communication with citizens.

The European Council, in particular in the wake of the terrorist attacks, has called upon the Commission to act. The Brussels European Council of November 2004, in adopting the Hague programme, called for the Commission *“to set up within its existing structures, while fully respecting national competences, integrated and coordinated EU crisis-management arrangements for crises with cross-border effects within the EU, to be implemented at the latest by 1 July 2006”*. Austria, Luxemburg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom presidencies have launched a joint initiative to implement this part of the Hague Programme. Most recently, in its declaration on the EU response to the London bombings of 13 July 2005, the Council requested the development of emergency response capabilities both at Member State and EU level, including those required to respond to a bio-terrorist attack, as well as of arrangements to share information, ensure coordination and enable collective decision making in an emergency, particularly for terrorist attacks on more than one Member State. The Council has also welcomed on 7 November 2005 *“the continuing work in collaboration with the Commission to develop a comprehensive plan...on the human influenza pandemic threats”*.

Information sharing, internal coordination, consolidating the alert systems managed by the Commission and availability of appropriate processes for decision making in the event of a crisis are key elements of preparedness and response planning. The Commission has already announced additional measures to strengthen the existing instruments and to meet the mandates given by the European Council. In its communication on preparedness and consequence management in the fight against terrorism of 20 October 2004 (COM(2004)701), the Commission stated it would create a general rapid alert system (ARGUS) to link all specialised systems for emergencies. Moreover, a central crisis centre¹ (CCC) would be established, which would bring together representatives of all relevant Commission services during an emergency. The CCC would coordinate efforts so as to evaluate the best practicable options for action and to decide on the appropriate response measures.

Taking also into account the structures proposed by the Council Presidencies, in particular the "EU Crisis Coordination Arrangements" (EUCCA) and the related "EU Integrated Crisis Management Arrangements" (EUICMA), the Commission supports the need for flexible coordination arrangements at EU level. Improved coordination at political level would allow

¹ Name changed in current legal base.

the Union to take maximum advantage of the available technical expertise and infrastructure, including the specialised Rapid Alert Systems (hereafter RAS) managed by the Commission. The Commission would have a strategic role to play, adding value through facilitating work of the Member States, to ensure coherence and consistency in their actions.

This document sets out the principles, processes and instruments proposed to implement ARGUS. The system will be operational as of 1 January 2006.

2. OBJECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES

The general rapid alert system (hereafter: ARGUS) aims at

- Providing an internal platform enabling the Directorates-general and services of the Commission to exchange, in real time, relevant information on emerging multisectoral crises or foreseeable or imminent threat thereof requiring action at Community level, whatever their nature, to facilitate coordination and cooperation and ultimately improve the efficiency and the consistency of the Commission response;
- Making available an appropriate coordination process to be activated in the event of a major crisis. This would allow the Commission to take decisions and manage a rapid, coordinated and coherent Commission response based on all relevant information, in its domains of competence and in cooperation with the other institutions;
- Providing the context to communicate effectively with citizens and to offer a balanced, coherent and complete picture of the efforts deployed by the Commission.

The principles underlying ARGUS are the following:

- The principle of subsidiarity.
- The system will respect the specific characteristics, competence and expertise of the existing RAS of the Commission, which will continue to carry out their current functions according to their specific procedures.
- ARGUS will operate in the event of a multisectoral crisis requiring action at Community level, whether affecting the citizens, the assets or the interests of Member States or third countries, whatever its cause and nature.
- At this stage, the communication network will be internal to the Commission and link its various RAS, Directorates-general and services. Member States will be connected through the RAS and their specific networks. This coordination will provide a comprehensive and consolidated database of relevant validated information when the Commission would be called upon to cooperate with Member States and the other institutions.
- ARGUS will use existing technology and infrastructure supported by Directorate General Informatics. Although at this stage, the ARGUS communication network will not handle European Union Classified Information, the Commission is considering options to develop a more robust and efficient system.

- The system will be reviewed, at the latest one year after the entry into force of the corresponding Commission Decision, in the light of experience gained and technological progress to ensure interlinkages and coordination of existing specialised networks.
- The system will function within the existing resources and means of the services.
- With respect to external communication, the communication will be ensured at the most appropriate geographical level (ie headquarters or from a representation/delegation) and through appropriate instruments to reach and fully inform the public (press conference, press release, internet...)

3. ARGUS

ARGUS shall consist of an internal communication network and a specific coordination process to be activated in case of a major multisectoral crisis. This process is defined in the annex to the Commission decision amending its internal rules of Procedures called common provisions setting-up the “ARGUS” general rapid alert system.

The internal electronic communications network will be realised through an information bus architecture. It will draw on existing databases and internal messaging technologies and will be supported by other means of communication (SMS, phone). Members of the ARGUS network will use it to share relevant information in real time on emerging and active crises and to coordinate response as appropriate. The information transmitted through the ARGUS bus will be available to all members, stored and logged. The system will be updated on the basis of experience gained and technological progress.

In the event of a major crisis, the President may decide, on his own initiative after having been alerted or at the request of a Member of the Commission, to activate a specific coordination process. The President may decide either to keep the responsibility to himself or to assign the responsibility for the Commission response to a Member of the Commission. Such responsibility will entail leading and coordinating the response to the crisis, representing the Commission towards the other institutions and being responsible for communicating with the public. The Secretariat general, under the authority of the President or the Member of the Commission to whom the responsibility was assigned, will activate the specific operational crisis management structure called Crisis Coordination Committee (CCC).

The CCC will assess and monitor the development of the situation, identify issues and options for decision and action, ensure that decisions and actions are implemented and ensure the coherence and consistency of the Commission response. However, decisions agreed within the CCC will be adopted through normal Commission decision-making procedures and will be executed by services and RAS.