2. Is the Commission aware that, according to the report referred to in question 1 above, the country's largest reserves of this metal are to be found in the area of Kivu which is controlled by an armed faction known as the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) which is supported by Rwanda?

3. Is the Commission also aware that the RCD is being partly financed by proceeds from the mining of coltan, being the principal shareholder of the SOMIGL, which controls mining operations?

4. At least one of the biggest processors of coltan is based in the European Union, that is to say H. C. Starck of Goslar, part of the Bayer Group in Germany. Given that the main purchasers of coltan claim not to know about the political situation and the provenance of the metal purchased by them, arguing that coltan is purchased through intermediaries, what action can the Commission take?

5. Demand for coltan has increased continuously thanks to the expanding markets in mobile telephones, putting pressure on traditional producers of coltan, including Australia and the United States, as a result of which the industry is showing increased interest in obtaining supplies from eastern Congo. In the Commission's view, are there any possibilities of preventing access to the European market for imports coming through Rwanda or Uganda?

6. In the Commission's view what other possibilities exist of helping to ensure that coltan extraction, together with ethnic and political differences, does not become a reason in itself for the continuation of the civil war in Congo, or at least of putting an end to the complicity of European Union-based companies in a war being waged for economic reasons? Is the Commission prepared to act accordingly?

(2002/C 40 E/049)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-1540/01
by Erik Meijer (GUE/NGL) to the Commission

(28 May 2001)

Subject: Forced labour and exploitation in the east of Congo-Kinshasa for the extraction of coltan used in mobile telephony

1. Is the Commission acquainted with an article appearing in the Dutch 'Trouw' journal of 18 April 2001 reporting that the Kivu area in the east of Congo-Kinshasa which, was previously a prosperous agricultural area, has now been laid to waste by the unrestrained extraction of coltan, that this not only has a harmful environmental impact but also is causing loss of life, since the hand-dug mine shafts are extremely prone to cave-ins, that not only are food supplies stagnating but also 30% of children are no longer able to attend school since they are being forced to dig for coltan and that the Rwandan Army also owns a number of mines, in which Congolese prisoners of war and Hutus are held in Rwandan jails are being used as forced labour?

2. Does the fact that proceeds from the mines in Rwandan ownership are directly used for the purchase of weapons prompt any form of action to prevent this?

3. Is the Commission aware that the information sought in questions 1 and 2 can be found in a United Nations report and that action is being taken to prevent its publication in full?

4. What contribution can the European Union make to prevent the use of forced labour under such dangerous conditions?

Joint answer
to Written Questions E-1539/01 and E-1540/01
given by Mr Nielson on behalf of the Commission

(3 September 2001)

The Commission is aware of the press report referred to by the Honourable Member concerning coltan mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The information tallies with what the Commission has been told by several organisations it has contacts with in the DRC (Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and international agencies), and the United Nations (UN) has published an Interim Report on the subject.
The UN Report focuses on the illegal exploitation of the DRC's natural resources and other wealth. It was presented to the Security Council by the Secretary-General, Mr Kofi Annan, on 14 April 2001 and was the subject of heated debate. In response to the criticisms, the Secretary-General extended the mandate of the experts who compiled the report by three months for them to add to the research and the information already provided. The experts will have the opportunity of studying in greater detail the conditions in which coltan and other natural resources are being minded, and to review other economic effects of the conflict, such as agreements with countries 'invited in' by the DRC in exchange for military support for the Kinshasa Government. This Report will be an important point of departure for the international community, which will have to take a stand on it.

The final version of the Report will be particularly useful as it will contribute to the debate on whether to prevent coltan obtained illegally in the DRC from gaining access to the European market. However, an embargo of this sort is neither possible nor effective without a decision from the UN Security Council. The Report will also help to shed light on the use of forced labour and child labour in the mines. The 13 April version of the Report touches on the use of prisoners (paragraph 60) and of children (paragraph 69) in the mines, based on information obtained by the Panel or from witnesses.

The fact that the warring factions in the DRC have an important economic interest in the extraction of coltan and other resources has increased the devastation in the Kivu area. Its decline began under President Mobutu and is due to several factors, one of the most important of these being ethnic conflict.

The situation became much worse following the genocide in Rwanda and Rwanda's intervention in both the DRC's wars, initially motivated by the need to secure the external border.

The international community is aware of the link between economic interests and the continuation of the war in Kivu.

In the Commission's view, the only lasting solution is to advance the peace process and to build legitimate institutions able to regulate the exploitation of resources and working conditions in the mines. This is what the Commission and the Member States are trying to achieve by taking a number of financial, political and diplomatic measures to get the peace process moving after the boost it received from the signing of the Lusaka ceasefire agreement.

WRITTEN QUESTION E-1564/01
by Michl Ebner (PPE-DE) to the Commission
(29 May 2001)

Subject: The suspension of bilingualism in Istria

On 9 April 2001 the Regional Council of Istria adopted the Statute of the Region which provided for the equality of the Italian and Croatian languages in all regional institutions and in all administrative proceedings.

On 23 April 2000 the Ministry of Justice in Zagreb suspended the provisions of this statute.

Can the Commission confirm that this is true? Does it not consider the suspension to be an obstacle in the negotiations with Croatia (economic cooperation)?

Lastly, how does the Commission intend to react to this violation of EU principles?

Answer given by Mr Patten on behalf of the Commission

(20 July 2001)

The Commission confirms the information that the Croatian Ministry of Justice has suspended 10 provisions of the new Istrian Statute, adopted on 9 April 2001 by the Istrian County Assembly. As a