

One of the seminar's conclusions was that it would be desirable for the Member States to take the requisite measures to ensure that 112 calls were answered in at least the eleven official languages of the European Union. The proposals put forward with a view to meeting this requirement ranged from the use of commercial translation services to automatic translation.

At a meeting held on 8 and 9 March 2002 in Rosersberg, Sweden, to discuss the efficient response to emergency calls, Lars Hedström, Head of the Swedish Rescue Services Agency, also referred to the language aspect with regard to 112 calls. The establishment of a network of national call centres and a contactable switchboard in every Member State capable of giving appropriate assistance was just one of the possible solutions to the language problem.

Is the Commission aware that language problems occur when callers dial the 112 emergency number in Europe and that such problems may result in valuable time being wasted in emergency situations? If so, will it seek solutions thereto – in whatever way – so that the 112 switchboards are able to answer callers in at least the eleven official languages of the European Union? If not, why not?

(¹) OJ C 172 E, 18.7.2002, p. 164.

Answer given by Mr Liikanen on behalf of the Commission

(14 November 2002)

In its answer to Written Question No 0176/02 by the Honourable Member, the Commission indicated that operators answered calls in the official language or languages of their country as well as, in almost all the Member States, in English.

The Commission is of course in favour of developing the language skills of emergency call operators, and is aware that language problems can in some cases affect the speed and quality of the emergency response. However, it believes the cost of training such operators to be able to answer calls in all eleven EU languages would be disproportionate to the results. In practice, it would certainly be desirable for operators to develop skills in the Union's most widely spoken languages in addition to English. It is vital that emergency call centres be located near to the sources of 112 calls so that operators can respond appropriately and rapidly to requests for assistance, and this inevitably limits the options for centralising calls at national level, for instance.

Also, the Commission is not convinced of the usefulness of automated answering systems, on two grounds. Firstly, the current technology can in no way guarantee a reliable and rapid response: voice recognition systems, for instance, are far from being sufficiently developed to take over the operator's role. Secondly, the Commission believes human operators are central to the system: anyone dialling 112 would prefer to speak to a person rather than a machine, especially in the emergency situations which are the subject of 112 calls.

(2003/C 222 E/020)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-2797/02

by Caroline Lucas (Verts/ALE) to the Commission

(7 October 2002)

Subject: Low Frequency Active Sonar

Pursuant to the Commission's response to my previous question E-2442/01 (¹): Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFAS) is applied by the US Navy for scientific, commercial and military purposes in the Atlantic Ocean, including the area near the coast of the Azores, within the territorial seas of Portugal. Within or even outside the territorial seas of Portugal the use of LFAS may have significant adverse impact on whales and dolphins living in Portuguese territorial waters. Hence, Portugal is obliged to take the requisite measures to avoid the deliberate disturbance of cetacean species which are strictly protected under Council Directive 92/43/EEC (²). Furthermore, there is evidence that similar LFAS systems are in development in France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and by NATO.

In light of the above, does the Commission now intend to raise the issue with the US Government?

Will the Commission alert the Portuguese Government to its obligation under Council Directive 92/43?

Is the Commission aware of the development of similar projects in the Member States or by NATO?

(¹) OJ C 81 E, 4.4.2002, p. 177.

(²) OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, p. 7.

Answer given by Mrs Wallström on behalf of the Commission

(29 November 2002)

Cetaceans are afforded strict protection by Directive 92/43/EEC ('Habitats' Directive) (¹), which requires Member States to take measures to prevent inter alia deliberate disturbance of these species.

Low-frequency active sonar (LFAS) emits intense, low-frequency tone bursts. It is widely suspected that this type of noise has a disturbing effect on cetaceans, but the seriousness and degree of that effect still need to be studied more thoroughly.

The Commission believes that, given its potential impact on cetaceans, this type of technology needs to be used with caution. Moreover, those provisions of Directive 92/43/EEC which protect cetaceans apply fully both in territorial waters and in the waters of the exclusive economic zone, if the Member State concerned exercises sovereign rights there. The Commission has offered this opinion to the Member States on several occasions.

To date, most of the information the Commission has received on this type of sonar has been prompted by reports of activities of a military nature coinciding with the stranding of cetaceans.

Nonetheless, even though Community law does not require Member States to supply information on such activities except in specific cases, such as those relating to derogations or complaints, the Commission took the opportunity at the recent Habitats Committee meeting on 20 November to request further details from the national authorities of the Member States where these events are probably taking place.

The Commission does not intend, for the moment, to raise the matter in the context of relations with the United States.

(¹) Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora — OJ L 206, 22.7.1992, amended by the Act of Accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden — OJ L 1, 1.1.1995.

(2003/C 222 E/021)

WRITTEN QUESTION P-2806/02

by Jules Maaten (ELDR) to the Commission

(30 September 2002)

Subject: Statements made on 24 September by the European Commission concerning a relaxation of the rules governing the reduction of budget deficits applying to the euro area countries

1. How can the statement made by the European Commission on 24 September 2002 about a relaxation of the rules governing the reduction of budget deficits be reconciled with another statement it made on the same day that there will be no tampering with the Stability Pact, and is the European Commission aware that, in taking that position, it was acting against the spirit of the Stability Pact and, consequently, inflicting serious damage on consumer confidence, which is already low?