

The Council would however stress that it has frequently acknowledged the importance of linguistic diversity within the European Union, as last reaffirmed by its resolution of 14 February 2002⁽¹⁾ on 'the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning in the framework of the implementation of the objectives of the European Year of Languages 2001'. Improving foreign language learning is also included among the objectives of the 'Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe'⁽²⁾ adopted within the context of the Lisbon strategy.

The Commission's forthcoming communication concerning an action plan on linguistic diversity and language learning will be examined with interest by the Council.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 50, 23.2.2002.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 142, 14.6.2002 (Objective 3.3).

(2003/C 280 E/074)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-0607/03

by José Ribeiro e Castro (UEN) to the Council

(3 March 2003)

Subject: Zimbabwe – Robert Mugabe regime – EU sanctions – EU-Africa relations

The following facts have recently been reported: (1) the package of sanctions against the regime of Robert Mugabe and its leading officials, including restrictions on their movement within the EU, which was due to lapse on 18 February 2003, has been renewed for a further year; (2) this decision was taken on a basis compatible with France's interests as regards the holding of a Franco-African summit during which Mugabe himself would visit Paris; (3) the EU-Africa summit scheduled for Lisbon which had been postponed to April 2003 has now been deferred indefinitely, on the grounds that it is not possible to be sure that Mugabe would refrain from attending and that his presence, or, indeed, the very possibility of it, is considered absolutely undesirable.

The element of the sanctions restricting travel by high officials of the Mugabe regime has, as is well known, generated, over a whole year, recurrent hesitations, uncertainties and criticisms, notably where bilateral or multilateral relations under the EU's external policy have been at stake. The conflicts arising on these occasions have, in the opinion of many, served only to benefit Mugabe and his regime, allowing it to sabotage meetings, divide the European side and attract solidarity in Africa.

The terms of the decision to renew the sanctions may even be seen as showing that the Council is not treating Lisbon (Portugal) in the same way as it treats Paris (France), considering that what may be condoned for Paris cannot be accepted for Lisbon and thus raising doubts as regards the proper implementation of the principle of the equality of all Member States and the provisions on mutual loyalty and solidarity laid down in Article 11(2) of the EU Treaty.

What explanation can the Council provide for the differential treatment of Lisbon and Paris? How does it justify the fact that the terms of the decision have made it possible to hold a Franco-African summit which concerned France's individual interests, and not a summit of collective interest to the whole Union? In the wake of this experience, does the Council not believe that it would be preferable to decree a three- to six-month moratorium for this element of the sanctions, following which time a new sanctions package could be decided and applied should the Mugabe regime reject the idea of minimum standards?

Reply

(21 July 2003)

The Council does not consider that Portugal and France have been treated differently in the questions raised by the Honourable Parliamentarian. France notified its intention to issue a visa to President Mugabe to attend the France-Africa Summit in accordance with the procedure set out in Common Position 2002/145/CFSP and Coreper on 14 February 2003 noted the absence of obstacles to this participation.

In the case of the Lisbon Summit, planned for 5 April 2003, it was concluded that in the present circumstances it would not be possible to achieve the broadest participation at the highest level in the Summit by both sides, which would affect the outcome. It would therefore be in the best interest of EU-Africa relations to postpone the Summit.

The Council has not debated the question of a moratorium for any element of the sanctions.

(2003/C 280 E/075)

WRITTEN QUESTION P-0627/03
by Jonas Sjöstedt (GUE/NGL) to the Council

(25 February 2003)

Subject: Political persecution in Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has developed into a harsh dictatorship in which the political opposition is systematically repressed. Even relatives and friends of opposition figures are punished with imprisonment, torture and internal exile.

One example of such repression is the reprisals suffered by the relatives of Sapar Yklimov. Sapar Yklimov was previously forced to leave Turkmenistan because of his criticism of the dictatorship in the country. He now lives in Sweden and is a Swedish citizen. Sapar Yklimov's relatives are being persecuted in Turkmenistan and are refused permission to leave the country. Among those being persecuted is Sapar Yklimov's daughter, who was previously in Sweden as a refugee.

What action has the Council taken against the persecution in Turkmenistan? Has the question of the persecution of Sapar Yklimov's relatives, among them his daughter, been taken up directly with the regime in Turkmenistan or does the Council intend to do so in the future?

Reply

(22 July 2003)

The difficult situation in Turkmenistan is a matter of grave concern to the European Union. In its declaration of 20 January 2003, the EU expressed its unequivocal support for a full and transparent investigation into recent events in Turkmenistan.

The Council would recall that seven EU Member States, and three other OSCE members, have implemented with regard to Turkmenistan the OSCE 'Moscow mechanism', which was adopted at the 1991 meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension in Moscow. More generally, the EU has supported this process since the start and actively monitored its implementation in Turkmenistan. The EU backs the efforts made by the Netherlands in the context of its OSCE Presidency to engage the authorities in Ashgabat in dialogue. The talks held by the Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs on 3 March 2003 were particularly useful in this respect.

The situation in Turkmenistan was the subject of considerable discussion at a meeting of all EU Heads of Mission in Central Asia on 5/6 March 2003. In the course of this and other Council discussions, various individual cases have been highlighted for attention.

Over the past weeks, EU Heads of Mission in Ashgabat have made strenuous efforts to communicate the EU's concerns to the Turkmen authorities, but have met with considerable difficulties. In these circumstances, the main priority has been to urge the Turkmen authorities to change their attitude, rather than to focus on individual cases.

Nonetheless, the EU will continue to seize every opportunity, including in the context of the 59th UNHCR meeting, to raise concerns, both general and specific, about the situation in Turkmenistan.