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DRUGS: MEPs call for common action

Confiscation of the assets of traffickers, closer cooperation between customs officers, creation of a central drugs information system - these are among the measures proposed for adoption in the Community by members of the European Parliament. The members approved by an overwhelming majority a call for ministers to "develop common policies", and to attack "every link of the international chain" which controls illegal drugs traffic from production to consumption.

The resolution of the Parliament follows the recommendations of the special enquiry committee which looked into the drugs problem in the Community. The committee, which worked on the problem for almost a year, approved a report prepared by Tory Euro-MP Sir Jack Stewart-Clark in September.

The report gave several worrying figures. About 1.5 million people, most of them between 17 and 25, take heroin regularly in the EC. One arrest in every two has a drugs connection. On a global scale, drugs trade earns about 300 billion dollars a year in illegal gains, about the same as the total income of a country like Italy.

The MEPs do not all see the problem in the same way, but a vast majority of them agree that the Twelve have to work together, both within the Community and outside in the world, to attack drugs addiction.

To cut production, MEPs suggest aids for the Third World to help in the conversion of other paying crops, as has been proposed recently by the Commission. They also propose strict controls on anything which can be used as a drug, together with closer cooperation between national authorities, including police and customs authorities. The Twelve should also adopt, they say, common measures for the freezing and seizure of the assets of drug dealers, with controls on the movement of money aimed at stopping the "laundering" of funds. Education and information schemes are also suggested, together with aid for treatment and rehabilitation of addicts.

EMERGENCY AID: Tents and drugs for El Salvador

Only two days after the earthquake in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador in Central America, the EC Commission had approved a grant of emergency aid worth 250 000 ECU*. As well as this prompt action, the Commission also set about organising the aid granted by national authorities in the member states.

The day after the decision, the Community aid, together with 175 000 ECU given by the British government, allowed a Red Cross plane loaded with 500 tents for emergency shelter and drugs to be sent to the scene.

The collaboration between the EC, the twelve member states and the UNDRO office of the United Nations also sent two Italian and one German plane on the way to El Salvador, carrying tents, blankets, medical equipment and drugs. French and Swiss disaster experts were also sent out.

By coincidence, Community aid officials were meeting in Brussels as the earthquake happened. The officials were trying to work out a new, more effective system for coordinating aid in cases of natural disasters.

The Salvadorian quake killed at least 1 000 people and left over 10 000 homeless.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IRL 0.76.

FISH: Consumers turn North

When it comes to fish, the European is showing more and more a preference for cod and other white fish.

To satisfy this appetite, suppliers have increasingly to turn to the north. In a recent report, the Commission points out that imports of white fish have risen 35% between 1983 and 1985.

Apart from those from the Community's waters, the majority of these fish come from Norway, Sweden, Iceland as well as Danish territories in the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Large quantities, especially of cod, come from Canada. Community fishermen, in addition, have to go and fish in the waters of these countries to find the fish they need.

CONSUMERS: Household appliances noise warning system approved

Industry ministers in the Internal Market Council in Luxembourg have approved a common system of consumer information on noise produced by electrical domestic appliances such as mixers, dishwashers and washing machines. The new system does not oblige member states to require manufacturers to carry noise information on their products, but sets down the standard form for labels if a member state decides to use them. The label to be fixed to the products in question will show the amount of noise produced, according to a common system of measuring. Products with labels from different countries can therefore be compared for noise levels.

However, there is nothing in the agreement to set limits on the level of noise appliances may produce.

CONSUMERS: Ban proposed on imitations

A proposal to ban products which could be unsafe because of their resemblance to food or sweets has been produced by the Commission.

The measure concerns products such as pencil rubbers in the shape of sweets and fruit, cosmetics in imitation beer or champagne bottles, sweet-shaped soaps and so on.

Some member states already control or ban such products. Pencil rubbers shaped like edibles are controlled in Greece, Italy and France. Belgium bans toys looking like fruit, and Ireland and Spain have restrictions on all toys. The proposal would bring laws together to protect the consumer, by banning manufacture, marketing, import and sale of such products, and existing stocks would have to be withdrawn.

ENERGY: The lessons of Chernobyl

The accident at the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl earlier this year should act as a salutary lesson to the nuclear industry and the authorities, according to Energy Commissioner Nic Mosar, addressing the World Energy Conference in Cannes. "Now that the emotional reactions have passed", he said, "we must consider the economic realities". Nuclear power is now responsible for 35% of the electricity generated in the Community, and by 1995 thirty new stations would be connected to the grid. "Like it or not", he said, "nuclear power has become an indispensable source of energy in many countries".

However, even accepting the inevitability of continued and growing use of nuclear generation, the lessons of Chernobyl had to be taken into account to guarantee the maximum level of safety for the population.

On the subject of oil prices, Commissioner Mosar told delegates that the price drop could end up by reducing the general energy price, and lead to an increase in the demand for oil. This would be the result of a reduced incentive to save energy, coupled with the return to oil for certain uses where substitutes have till now been used, and growth in demand as a result of general economic growth. This in turn would lead to a new increase in prices. The way forward for the Community, he said, was to stick to its energy objectives in the long term, with an accent on energy conservation and oil substitution wherever this was economically justified.

WINE: US are Europe's biggest clients

After a bad year in 1982/83, when exports of wine from the EC exceeded imports by only 3.8 million hectolitres, the Community's surplus rose again to 4.2 million in 1983/84, and 5.7 million in 1984/85. This increase, explains a report published by the Commission on the wine situation in the Community, is largely due to an increase in demand from Canada, the United States and the Nordic countries. The US is still the major customer for Community wine, taking nearly half of the total.

Despite these encouraging statistics, however, the report counsels caution in projecting for the future. The predominance of the US in the export table means it will be responsible for the most part for any future increase in exports. That, in turn, the report says, depends on many factors, including the level of the dollar and the state of trade in general between the two trade partners. Community exports of wine to the US were threatened in a recent trade dispute, now resolved.

On the Community side, Italy continues to be the main exporter of wine, taking 47.3% of all export orders in 1984/85, as against 46.5% in the previous year. France sold just under 36.5%, down substantially on the previous year, and Germany trailed with only 10.7% as against 12.1% in 1983/84. Germany is the Community's leading importer of wine, followed by the UK, France and the Netherlands.

CULTURE: Community subsidises translations for minor languages

The EC Commission has granted half of the cost of a translator's fee for the translation of "The Grief of Belgium" by the Flemish author Hugo Claus, according to the answer to a written question from Belgian MP Willy Kuijpers. The grant is part of the Community's scheme of aids for translations, aimed at increased Community action in the cultural field. Other similarly-aimed actions include aids for multi-member state co-productions in film and television.

Hugo Claus is one of Flemish Belgium's greatest authors, and his book has been described as "the finest book ever to appear in the Dutch language". It is written in Flemish, a dialect form of Dutch, one of the less widespread of the nine Community languages. Community actions such as this are aimed at helping awareness of the literature of these minority languages, such as Dutch, Greek and Danish.

HEALTH: Europe-wide compensation for industrial diseases

Conditions on the granting of compensation for workers suffering from industrial diseases have been broadly harmonised across the Community, the Commission says. Two important occupational lung diseases - pneumoconiosis and asbestos mesothelioma - are covered by social security benefits in all members states. In addition, workers entitled to compensation benefits from one member state may be paid by another if they have taken up residence, under normal benefit rules. Furthermore, in considering entitlement to compensation for diseases caused by prolonged exposure to harmful working environments, account is now taken of work periods abroad.

TECHNOLOGY: 250 000 pages of information on one disc

Music lovers have already discovered the compact disc. But it is also becoming a more and more important tool for business, too. Compact disc databases are increasing in number, and the EC Commission is involved in developing this new medium, from standardising materials to the creation of new databases.

The fact is that the shiny little disc which is capable of bringing you Beethoven or Dire Straits in perfect sound is also able to store the equivalent of 250 000 pages of information. The disc, known as CD-ROM (compact disc read-only memory), is the same in both cases, but instead of a stereo system, the data disc is connected to a mini-computer able to "read" the discs.

Invented by Philips and first marketed by Sony, the discs are made all over the world to the same standard, as are the players. A similarly universal standard is also required for computer use of discs. After Commission intervention, the US-inspired High Sierra norm will soon be the accepted European standard.

There are already thirty or so compact disc databases in the world, most, like the stock exchange company list, from the US. Europe, however, has its share of databases, including the Encyclopedia Britannica, the catalogue of German publisher Bertelsmann and the medical database Excerpta Medica from Dutch publisher Elsevier.

To encourage European CD databases, the EC Commission has set aside 2.5 million ECU* for nine projects in information technology research. Financing is to the tune of 25-35% of costs, the rest being taken up by companies. This should, it is hoped, allow European companies to develop a good share of the market by 1990.

For the time being, compilers of CD and videodisc databases will gather in Luxembourg November 5 to 7 at a symposium on electronic publishing organised by the Commission.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.71 or IR£ 0.76

ANDORRA: From the Middle Ages to the Community

For the majority of European tourists, Andorra means cheap wine and duty-free cigarettes, skiing and little else. The tiny Pyrenean principality hit the headlines in September with the visit of French President Mitterrand, but otherwise it keeps a low profile. The country is something of a problem for the EC now, though, because since January it has been nestled in the midst of the Community of Twelve, while insisting on its separateness.

A tiny state of 466 square kilometres and 47 000 inhabitants, Andorra sits between Spain and France, a survivor from the Middle Ages like Monaco, Liechtenstein and San Marino. Government consists, since 1278, of two "co-princes" - one the bishop of the town of Urgel, 15 km from Andorra, and the other the French president, heritor of the Navarran kings and the French kings.

Andorra, though it has its local government, has a different form of political life than the democracies that surround it. There are no recognised political parties, and unions are banned. The prime minister was the only candidate on his election by the Parliament.

Andorrans are of Catalan blood. Catalan is an official language, although most teaching is done in French or Spanish. Most of the people, however, are foreigners, including 30 000 from Spain and 3 000 from France.

Likewise, Spain and France supply the currency, and the defence of the tiny realm. Andorra has no currency or army of its own. Andorrans pay no income tax, and duties on drink, tobacco and consumer products are very low. Wealth comes from tourism; five ski stations and low prices attract millions of visitors annually, to the dismay of French and Spanish custom men.

Trade between Andorra and her two neighbours is organised by rules dating back to 1867, which sometimes conflict with EC trade rules. Nothing changed in that area when Spain joined the Community in January, but a new trade regime is expected to be introduced in 1988.