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Mailed from Brussels X

Journalists

ENVIRONMENT: Waste not?

The Twelve undertake to tackle two major sources of pollution.

Thanks to measures taken by the European Community's environment ministers on June 9, the hundreds of municipal incinerators to be found in the 12-nation Community will soon no longer pollute the atmosphere quite as much. The ministers also took the opportunity to deal with the toxic waste produced in the manufacture of titanium dioxide.

The ministers began by completing the adoption of a Community regulation which sets strict limits on the emission of pollutants from new incinerators and the minimum temperatures needed to guarantee the destruction of certain toxic substances. They thus confirmed the agreement reached at the beginning of March.

They then went on to approve a complementary regulation aimed at reducing the pollution from existing municipal incinerators, of which there were 524 at the beginning of 1988, dealing with some 27 mn.t. of waste products each year. The existing plants will gradually have to meet the standards set for new incinerators.

Some 40% of municipal waste is burned in France each year, and roughly 30% in Germany and the Netherlands. As for the cocktail of pollutants spewed into the air, it includes lead, cadmium, mercury, hydrochloric acid, etc.

The environment ministers also adopted a directive which provides for the eventual elimination of the pollution resulting from the toxic wastes produced in the manufacture of titanium dioxide. This is a substance used in various branches of the chemical industry, including the manufacture of paints and varnishes. The discharge of this waste into the sea can produce a "red mud", hard to get rid of. The directive contains a timetable for the reduction of toxic emissions into the air, rivers and seas.

A Community regulation on this subject exists since 1978; it provides for controls and a reduction in the quantities discharged. But that it is not always properly enforced is clear from the European Commission's decision in June to take Belgium to court. The Belgian authorities impose no restrictions on the discharge of titanium dioxide waste into the sea, according to the Commission.

ENVIRONMENT: The greenhouse effect moves to centre stage

The Twelve recognize the urgency of the problem.

We may not yet know all the likely consequences of the greenhouse effect, which is due to the accumulation of carbon dioxide and other gases in the earth's atmosphere, where they act like a blanket. But we must act quickly to reduce its inevitable impact on the planet. The European Commission's environment ministers, in taking this stand in Luxembourg at the beginning of June, were signalling the need for the Community to adapt all its policies to the fight against the greenhouse effect.

In practice this implies three kinds of preventive action. Firstly, the use of those forms of energy which do not give off carbon dioxide - such as hydroelectric, solar, wind and nuclear - must be encouraged. This will not be easy in a Community that has encouraged the use of coal since several years. Secondly, the area devoted to forests must be increased. The EC has recently taken a step in this direction by adopting its very first forestry action programme.

But efforts to prevent the greenhouse effect cannot be limited to the European Community, which occupies only a tiny part of the earth's surface. The third category of activities must be aimed, therefore, at preventing the destruction of tropical forests (in Brazil, for example) and halting the steady advance of the desert, as in Africa. Here the Twelve can only orientate their development aid activities in the light of this new requirement and take an active part in the relevant international organizations.

The greenhouse effect does not belong to a hypothetical future. It has already begun to make itself felt. The Community's environment ministers in fact believe it is time to take steps to limit the damage, by strengthening the protection of European coasts, for example. This is logical, given that the warming of the earth's climate and the subsequent melting of polar ice is expected to lead to a rise in sea levels. The environment ministers are asking their own departments to coordinate their activities. They are also insisting on the need to keep public opinion informed, both on the phenomenon itself and the measures to be taken to combat it.

The European Commission, which has already begun a detailed examination of the means available to fight the greenhouse effect, must submit its preliminary findings to the Council of Ministers before the end of next year.

RIGHT OF RESIDENCE: Will 3 go into 12?

New proposals in favour of students, pensioners and other non-active persons.

The European Commission launched a fresh initiative at the beginning of June so that students, pensioners and other non-active persons can enjoy the right to live where they like in the 12-nation European Community. Since its earlier proposal for a general right of residence for all EC nationals had proved too much for the Twelve, the Commission sent them three separate regulations, one for each of the three groups mentioned earlier.

This tactic could lead to a solution for the two most numerous groups - students and pensioners. The fact is the proposal the EC Council of Ministers was unable to agree on during its meeting on May 3 required unanimity. It had been tabled in 1979 and conformed to the ground rules of the Treaty of Rome, the Community's "constitution", of the time.

Since then this "constitution" has been reformed by the Single European Act, in force since 1 July 1987. It now stipulates that the Council can adopt by a majority vote Community regulations which ban discrimination on grounds of nationality. The European Commission is therefore asking the Twelve to use this provision to grant the right of residence to students. Its exercise would be subject to two conditions: the students must be enrolled in an educational institution with a view to following training courses, and they must join a private insurance scheme if they are not covered by the regular medical insurance scheme in operation at home or in their host country.

The Twelve can also guarantee by a majority vote the right of residence of pensioners, according to the Commission; it holds that the revised "constitution" provides for this in order to ensure the free movement of workers. Retired people must simply show they are receiving a pension.

This leaves only one group for whom a unanimous vote is required - other non-active persons (in practice, people of independent means). They must prove they will not be a charge on the host country, having adequate financial means at their disposal. Given that on May 3 only Britain and Denmark opposed the very principle of the right of residence, it is to be hoped that the Commission's new initiative will move things along.

CURRENCIES: The peseta and escudo join the ECU

The Spanish currency is now part of the European Monetary System.

From 21 September 1989 the currencies of all European Community countries will be a part of the basket of currencies known as the ECU or European Currency Unit. This follows a decision of the Community's finance ministers of June 19 to add the Spanish peseta and Portuguese escudo to the ECU*.

A few days earlier, on June 7, Spain's Finance Minister, Carlos Solchaga, had announced that the peseta would join the exchange rate mechanism of the European Monetary System before 1 July 1990. This is the date set for the total liberalization of capital movements throughout the European Community. The government in fact set 19 June 1989 as the date for joining the ERM. In practice this means that the value of the peseta is linked hereafter to those of the other EC currencies in the system: the German mark, French franc, Belgo-Luxembourg franc, Dutch guilder, Danish crown, Italian lira and Irish pound.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.66 or IR£0.78.

SPORT: The first European Olympic Festival is set for Brussels in 1991

A joint initiative of the European Community's 12 Olympic committees.

The first sporting festival for the European Community's Olympic youth will take place in 1991 in Brussels. It will bring together the best athletes from the 12-nation Community, to contest in a dozen disciplines. The festival is the joint initiative of the 12 national Olympic committees. It is planned to hold it every two years, in the different Community countries. The national Olympic committees announced their plans on June 9, during a meeting with the European Commissioner responsible for a People's Europe, Jean Dondelinger.

The European Commission has been trying to promote the European image through sport for the last four years, and to encourage sportsmen and women to think of themselves as Europeans also. Two sporting events sponsored by the European Community have become regular fixtures in the sporting calendar: the first is a round Europe cycle race, the other a yachting race. In 1992, the year which sees the completion of the single European market, the Olympic Games will be held in two European cities, Barcelona and Albertville, and will certainly be marked by a gigantic public relations operation, involving the use of such Community symbols as the flag, the ECU or European Currency Unit, etc.

SOCIETY: ECU 55mn.* for Europe's poor

The Twelve launch the third European anti-poverty programme.

Thanks to the ECU 55mn. released by the European Community's employment ministers on June 12, the long-term unemployed will be able to re-enter active life. Spread out over five years - from 1 July 1989 to 30 June 1994 - in the framework of the third European Community anti-poverty programme, the money will not produce miracles; but it will make it possible to finance local experiments that should serve as models for the Community as a whole.

The sum approved by the ministers is well below the ECU 70mn. sought by the European Commission and the ECU 125mn. proposed by the European Parliament. Nevertheless, with some ECU 11mn. a year on average, the new programme will be better off than its predecessor, which had to make do with just a little over ECU 7mn. a year.

A study published by the European Commission at the end of last year put the total number of poor in the Community as a whole at 44mn. - or roughly 14% of the total population.

ROAD SAFETY: Stricter standards for tyres

The Twelve agree on the depth of tyre treads but not alcohol levels.

In the 1992 single market cars, minibuses and vans will require tyres that are less worn out than some in use today. In order to improve road safety the European Community's transport ministers adopted a regulation on June 5 which makes compulsory a minimum tread depth of 1.6mn. on tyres used on the vehicles mentioned earlier as well as on lorries under 3.5 tonnes.

The ministers failed, however, to reach agreement on two other measures aimed at improving road safety. The first is a European Commission proposal fixing a maximum blood alcohol concentration of 0.5 mg/ml for drivers of cars, motorcycles and lorries. The level at present is 0.8 mg/ml in most Community countries.

The EC Council of Ministers was also unable to reach agreement on the compulsory use of safety belts, in both the front and rear seats of cars and minibuses with fewer than 10 seats, and in the front seats of minibuses and lorries of no more than 3.5 tonnes.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.66 or IRE0.78.

ENVIRONMENT: The Twelve act to stop the black market in ivory

The EC's environment ministers seek to protect the African elephant.

In order to halt the trade in ivory, which threatens the African elephant with extinction, the EC's environment ministers asked the European Commission on June 9 to prepare a draft regulation imposing an early ban on imports of both worked and raw ivory into the Community.

The Ministers also asked the Commission to take the steps needed for the Community to include the African elephant on the official international list of endangered species. The fact is an international convention exists which seeks to limit - or ban, as the case may be - trade in these species. The signatories to this Convention are to meet this October.

Until such time as the EC regulation comes into force, the President of the EC Council of Ministers, Spain's Javier Luis Saez Cosculluela, has asked his colleagues to adopt emergency measures at the national level banning the import of ivory.

The situation appears to be dramatic. The number of elephants in Africa has fallen from 1.5mn. in the early 1980s to between 400,000 and 450,000. The explanation is that nearly 400t. of ivory, worth some \$80mn., are sold each year. The Indian elephant, although numbering between 10,000 and 15,000 only, is too well protected to be threatened in the same way as his African cousin.

ENVIRONMENT: When a frontier passes through the middle of a field

Pesticides which are dangerous in Belgium and harmless in the Netherlands.

A farmer whose fields lie on both sides of the Belgo-Dutch frontier was found guilty by the Belgian authorities last year of having brought into the country a pesticide which is authorized in the Netherlands but banned in Belgium. He had had the misfortune to spray it on his fields inside Belgium.

For the Belgian Euro-MP, Pol Marck, who drew the European Commission's attention to it, the episode underlines the absence of harmonization, at the Community level, of chemical and pharmaceutical products used in agriculture. So far the Twelve have not adopted the proposals drawn up by the Commission in 1976. The latter now plans to send them fresh proposals. 1992, after all, is just three years away.

ENVIRONMENT: Community beaches - a map with far too many black spots

The quality of bathing waters has improved, but much remains to be done.

- 4 Would you like to be sure that the waters in which you are about to take a swim is sufficiently clean, even to the point where they meet the standards set by the European Community directive? Then spend your holidays in Ireland: it is not only a country of great natural beauty and charm but also the only one in the Community whose beaches and natural bathing facilities meet national standards, which in Ireland's case are even higher than those set out in the EC directive.

This directive dates back to 1976. It allowed Member States a period of 10 years in which to rid bathing waters not only of bacteria-laden sewage but also chemical wastes and oil pollution. The directive also required them to send the European Commission regular information on the quality of their bathing waters, which would form the basis of the Community's own reports.

The report on the situation in 1987 has just been published. The main conclusion to be drawn is that while a large number of beaches and other natural bathing facilities, including some of the most popular, show considerable improvement since the EC directive came into force, there are numerous black spots. This is clear from the maps included in the report, which show the beaches where energetic measures are needed.

The European Commission in fact has decided to take a number of Member States to court, for their failure to comply with the Directive. And it plans to stand its ground until such time as the necessary measures have been taken, especially as the improvements noted in 1985 and 1986 were not always present in 1987. The fact is the situation deteriorated slightly in Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and Spain, while the improvements noted in the U.K. in earlier years were not maintained.

True, the average for the U.K. is much lower than elsewhere, at least as regards coastal areas. Thus 42% of the beaches met Community standards in 1986 and 59% in 1987, as against 90% in the Netherlands, 84% in Italy, 83% in France, 81% in Spain and 79% in Denmark. Only Belgium, with 44%, was worse off than Britain, while the German and Greek surveillance programmes seemed adequate: it was not possible to evaluate the situation as a whole from the information they provided. As for Portugal, it has been granted an exemption until 1992.

The report (ISBN 92-825-9487-4) is published by the European Community's Publications Office, 2 rue Mercier, L-2985 Luxembourg. It is priced at ECU 12.50.*

* 1 ECU = UK£0.66 or IR£0.78.

TRANSPORT: The single market for lorries takes shape

The Twelve agree on maximum authorized weights and the lengths of semi-trailers.

Slowly but surely the 12-nation European Community is moving towards a single market for lorries, in which these modern-day juggernauts will be able to move freely from one country to another, without being held up because of differences in technical regulations. At their meeting of June 5 the Community's transport ministers took two small but significant steps in this direction.

They finally agreed on 31 December 1988 as the date when the derogations granted Britain and Ireland on maximum authorized weights of lorries will finally expire. Until then these two countries will still have the right to turn back lorries and buses which meet Community standards on this point but not those of Britain and Ireland. The two countries have been granted this derogation in order that they can strengthen roads and bridges to take the much heavier road vehicles used on the Continent.

The transport ministers also decided to increase the total length of articulated vehicles and to fix the load length of semi-trailers. These measures, which will apply throughout the Community from 1 January 1991, will ensure that the cabs are roomier, thus adding to the safety and comfort of drivers.