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**Declaration by the Presidency, on behalf of the European Union,
on the opening of peace talks between
the Colombian Government and the ELN**

The European Union has noted the opening of dialogue between the Government of Colombia and the ELN, announced in a joint statement on 22 June 2000.

The European Union welcomes the start of these discussions and the steps taken in the search for a peaceful solution. It encourages both parties in their willingness to involve the international community in the peace process and welcomes the presence of Member States of the Union in the group of "facilitator" countries in the peace process between the Colombian Government and the ELN.

The European Union wishes to restate the importance it attaches to all sections of Colombian society respecting the fundamental principles listed in its "Declaration on human rights and the humanitarian situation in Colombia" of 23 May 2000.

The European Union strongly condemns the grave violations of human rights and the increasing number of acts of violence and atrocities in Colombia. In particular, the European Union reiterates with determination its firm opposition to the practices of abduction and kidnapping, whoever carries them out and for whatever reason.

The European Union calls on all armed groups holding hostages to release them. In particular, it urges the ELN to end the captivity of all the hostages it holds, particularly those held following the hijacking of a commercial Avianca flight on 12 April 1999.

The Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union, the associated countries Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area align themselves with this declaration.