

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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**Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union
on the situation in Southern Serbia**

The EU supports the initiative of the Belgrade authorities to find a peaceful and durable solution to the current situation in Southern Serbia which risks destabilising the region.

It welcomes the plan adopted by the FRY and Serbian governments on 8 February and presented by Serb Deputy PM Covic to the EU Political and Security Committee today. The plan, which aims at giving a comprehensive response to the crisis, will serve as a good basis for further discussions. In the long term, the economic and social development of the region, the full integration of the Albanian community into political life and civil society, and respect for human rights and minorities in line with international standards are the only guarantee for stability in the area within a democratic FRY. This political, economic and social approach corresponds to the spirit of the Zagreb Summit and the Stability Pact.

The success of this initiative depends primarily on the efforts of the parties concerned, but will require the support of the international community.

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The EU will support political, economic and social measures in favour of the local population while respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the FRY. The EC and EU Member States have already committed well over one million Euro for humanitarian and development projects (notably support for schools) in the Presevo region. The Commission has announced today an additional assistance of 900.000 Euro to municipalities concerned.

At the start of the crisis the EU, with the agreement of the Yugoslav leadership, sent EUMM observers to report on the development of the crisis as well as to contribute to early warning and confidence building in the area in conformity with its mandate. A reinforcement of the personnel on the spot has been agreed.

The EU looks forward to the Serb and Yugoslav authorities implementing measures in favour of full integration of the Albanian community as soon as possible to build the necessary confidence.

The EU expects the Albanian community in Southern Serbia to designate representatives who can engage in a constructive dialogue with the Serb and Yugoslav authorities. This implies an immediate cessation of violence by the armed extremist Albanian groups notably in the GSZ.

The EU reiterates its condemnation of all acts of violence. It appeals to Kosovars with political authority to distance themselves clearly and publicly from the actions of armed extremist groups in Southern Serbia.

The EU emphasises the importance of the continuing efforts of KFOR notably to ensure the effective control of the administrative boundary between Kosovo and Serbia.

The EU is ready to work closely with the authorities of the FRY and Serbia with a view to examining further support aimed at contributing to a peaceful and sustainable solution in Southern Serbia.