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NOTE BIO AUX BUREAUX NATIONAUX
cc. aux Membres du Service du Porte-Parole

Press conference by President Santer and Vice-Presidents Brittan and Marin on eve of Bangkok Summit

Introduction by President Santer

"Before leaving for Bangkok with Sir Leon and Mr. Marin, I wanted to tell you how much importance the European Commission attaches to the Asia-Europe Summit which will take place next Friday and Saturday in Bangkok.

As from 1994, the Commission insisted on the European Union giving more priority to Asia. The Commission stressed the need for a new strategy based on a global approach covering political, economical and cooperation issues. Here are a few key words from a policy paper on the Union's strategy for Asia which we sent in 1994 to the Council of Ministers : political dialogue, security, opening of markets, economic cooperation, cooperation in general. In this framework, which was adopted by the Council, many bilateral efforts have been made towards individual Asian countries and ASEAN as a whole. Our Asian partners have reacted very positively and the fact that they have organised the Asia-Europe Summit is for the Commission a confirmation that its analysis was the right one. Asia deserves to be treated like a partner with a political importance commensurate with its growing economic strength. Asia and Europe must now develop a partnership which contributes to the stability, the growth and the prosperity in the world.

This Summit is the first of its kind and its importance should not be under-estimated. This is the first meeting between the European Union and a large number of Asian countries meeting as regions - and they meet with an agenda covering all the themes which reflect a maturing relationship.

What will we discuss? First of all, the political dialogue. Under this heading, the exchange of views about the political situation in the two regions will give us an opportunity to welcome the efforts made within the ASEAN Regional Forum to further the inter-Asian political dialogue. It will also give us the opportunity to examine possibilities for cooperation in areas of mutual interest which are numerous. To mention only a few : the reform of international institutions, arms, non-proliferation, etc. The initial contribution decided yesterday by the European Union of 5 million ECU to KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation) will be a concrete illustration of our interest in Asian security.

The second theme will be economic cooperation. I will re-iterate our strong commitment to the World Trade Organisation and our desire to work with our Asian partners for the success of the next WTO ministerial meeting of Singapore. I will underline the importance of determined action to stimulate the currently insufficient investment flows between Europe and Asia. I will confirm our wish to create a multilateral investment agreement in the WTO framework.

A third theme on the agenda opens a vast field of cooperation on a large number of issues : development cooperation, human resources, education, environment, science and technology, culture, etc. The Asia-Europe Forum which was held in Venice in January of this year has shown the importance of all these areas for closer links between the regions.

All this shows that the Asia-Europe Summit is an occasion for opening up a vast potential for cooperation. It is the beginning of a process of "rapprochement" allowing the participants to know each other better and to build bridges : these are essential conditions for harvesting concrete results in the future. I will insist that once we have created the momentum we must sustain it by working with determination for the concrete implementation of commitments and principles. This should be done at the level of high officials and ministers in preparation for the next Asia-Europe Summit which, I hope, will be held in 2 years time in Europe".

VP Marin then said the summit would give both sides the chance to step beyond outdated stereotypes they hold of each other, with Europeans seeing Asia as a threat to European jobs and Asians seeing Europe as a fortress against trade and competition with a tendency to preach moral standards to the rest of the world.

Sir Leon focused on the follow-up to the summit, saying Bangkok would not produce treaties or contracts but that senior officials would carry the work forward, notably by promoting European investment in Asia, by improving Asian transparency in its handling of investment rules, and by working with Asia to achieve big results at the WTO Ministerial at Singapore in December.

The following themes were tackled during questions:

Human rights

President Santer said all countries at the summit were committed to UN declarations on human rights, development, the environment and women's rights, and that it was essential for these issues to be referred to in this context. But the summit should avoid an atmosphere of confrontation and focus instead on building bridges of trust if Europe wished the relationship to be successful. Only after building trust would the EU be able to engage fairly in a frank exchange of views on these subjects. We need, he said, to put ourselves in the minds of the others to understand them. Universal human rights will undoubtedly play a role, he said, adding that the EU should stress how it is helping to solve human rights problems through positive action, through NGOs, for example.

Asked if the EU's own blemishes lessened its chance of improving relations with Asia, President Santer agreed that the EU should put its own house in order on human rights, and said Europe does not always have to be proud of its own activities. But he asserted that Europe does have a number of ace-cards, namely the fact that we have a 230 billion Ecu trading relationship with Asia, as against a 180 billion Ecu one with the United States, and that economic and cultural contacts needed to be improved to strengthen this relationship.

VP Marín said the EU had a reputation for arrogance in Asia, Africa and Latin America, behaving as though it were the centre of the world and lecturing other countries on how to behave. This must change. The Commission could not guarantee that national governments would not mention human rights, he said. On East Timor, he added that if Portugal's prime minister wished to raise the issue at Bangkok, he was free to do so.

Participants

Asked why not all of Asia will be present, President Santer said it had been up to the Asian side to choose who goes to Bangkok, though the exact composition may change if further summits take place in future.

Protectionism

Sir Leon pointed out that the EU has been steadily opening itself to Asian business for some time by removing internal and external barriers, so the protectionist Fortress label was old-fashioned and "dépassé". On the external front, the EU has abolished 6,500 national quotas and replaced them with just 7 Community ones. Furthermore, the EU pushed successfully for a major tariff-cutting deal in the Uruguay Round, and took the lead in achieving a world deal on financial services, without the Americans.

Best regards,
N. G. van der Pas

