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VICE-PRESIDENT P.J. HILLERY ADDRESSES THE EUROPEAN CONSUMERS' FORUM IN WEST BERLIN

The year 1975 would, hopefully, mark the culmination point in the Commission's first efforts in the field of consumer protection and information Vice-President P.J. Hillery said when addressing the European Consumers' Forum in West Berlin on 23 January. The carrying out of the Commission's action programme for the protection of consumers marked another new phase in the development of the Community and was further evidence of its social consciousness and concern for people. As the member of the Commission responsible for social affairs this was particularly gratifying for him, Dr. Hillery said.

Certain action has already been undertaken by the Commission to implement the action programme for consumers. In particular, draft directives have been prepared for the harmonisation of laws in the Member States on consumer credit, labelling of food products, standard packaging and producer responsibilities and it should not be long before proposals concerning misleading advertising will be ready.

From the beginning, our Community has preoccupied itself with consumer interests in the elaboration of common policies provided for under the Treaties. Examples of this concern are many and varied :

- the free movement of agricultural and industrial products which has provided a greater choice of goods to the Community consumer;
- the Common Agricultural Policy where in several sectors of production, consumers are benefitting from prices lower than those at world level;
- the Commission's rules on competition which have played a role in dampening the rate of increase in consumer prices, and
- finally, in the field of approximation of laws in the Member States where account has been taken of the need to protect the health and safety of the Community consumer.

However, on the basis of experience gained over the years it became increasingly clear that the time had come to develop a specific and comprehensive common policy for consumer protection and information and one which would correspond to the legitimate interests of the Community consumer.

In this a considerable impetus was provided by the Paris Summit of October 1972 when the Heads of State or Government affirmed their willingness to undertake such a policy in reinforcing and coordinating their efforts at consumer protection. The principal objectives of this policy was an overall improvement in the quality of life. As is the normal

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procedure in our Community it was the Commission which had the task of preparing the necessary initiatives in this area during 1973 by, on the one hand, establishing close contacts with consumer organisations and, on the other hand, in preparing a specific programme of action. In order to establish permanent and close contacts with consumers the Commission in September 1973 set up the Consumers' Consultative Committee which is charged with the task of advising the Commission on all problems related to Consumer protection. This initiative followed a Round Table Conference in the spring of 1973 between consumer organisations and Commission representatives.

This Committee represents for the Commission a very valuable link with European consumer organisations and should permit improved consultations with these bodies in the elaboration of Community policies. In this connection, it is I feel significant to mention the exchange which took place recently between a delegation from the Consumers' Consultative Committee and the relevant commissioners on the agriculture price proposals for the 1975/76 season.

I have already referred to the Commission's programme of action which was adopted in December 1973 and then sent on to the Council for approval. This programme defines the objectives and the priorities which will guide Community action in the field of consumer protection and information over the next four years and lays down the basic rights for consumers.