

EU and Mediterranean countries reinforce trade partnership

The Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area was on the agenda of a meeting between EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht and Trade Ministers of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) today in Brussels. Participants also discussed how to enhance economic integration and how to boost Euro-Mediterranean trade and investment. The Conference also saw the launching of the EU Export Helpdesk in a fifth language, Arabic.

"Since 1995, we have made significant progress in deepening trade relations in the Euro-Mediterranean region", said Commissioner Karel De Gucht. "The EU remains strongly committed to an ambitious agenda that can enhance growth and prosperity on all sides of the Mediterranean. I am also proud to announce that we are launching an Arabic version of our Export Helpdesk today. This is an important step to better address the needs of the economic operators in the region."

Co-chaired by Egypt, France, Belgium (as presidency-in-office of the EU) and the European Commission, the conference highlighted the importance of pursuing a common and ambitious trade agenda beyond 2010. Ministers endorsed measures to facilitate the trade of Palestinian products to Euro-Mediterranean markets. These include a future proposal by the Commission to grant duty- and quota-free access for all Palestinian products, the possible accession of the Palestinian Authority to the Agadir Agreement and the strengthening of the Palestinian administration in the area of trade.

Moreover, Ministers set Euro-Mediterranean working priorities for 2011. They agreed to focus on initiatives that can bring the partnership closer to economic operators, such as a Trade and Investment Facilitation mechanism to provide centralised information on trade and investment flows, regulations and conditions in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Jointly combating piracy and counterfeiting is another priority. Key representatives of the Euro-Mediterranean business community attended part of the meeting and contributed a useful practitioners' angle to the debate.

In the margins of the Ministerial meeting, Commissioner Karel De Gucht and Minister Steven Vanackere signed bilateral protocols, creating a mechanism which will allow a more efficient settlement of trade disputes between the EU and Egypt, and the EU and Lebanon.

Background

The Euro-Mediterranean partnership

The Euro-Mediterranean partnership, launched in 1995 and revamped in 2008 with the creation of the "Union for the Mediterranean", has strengthened trade relations between the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries. The key objective of the trade partnership is to create a comprehensive Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area, that goes beyond trade in goods and basic provisions and aims to substantially liberalise trade between both the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries (North-South), and Southern Mediterranean countries themselves (South-South).

The EU is the most important trading partner for the region, covering more than 40% of its total trade. In 2009, EU-Southern Mediterranean countries' total trade in goods amounted to almost €200 billion.

The Export Helpdesk

The Export Helpdesk is an online service by the Commission to facilitate market access for developing countries to the European Union. It provides information required by exporters interested in supplying the EU market. From labelling rules to import tariffs, the Export Helpdesk offers information free of charge and in five languages – English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic. In 2009 the database received almost 200.000 hits from the South Mediterranean countries.

For further information

The current state-of-play on the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area

<http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=634>

Southern Mediterranean countries including trade statistics

<http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/regions/euomed/>

The Export Helpdesk

http://exporthelp.europa.eu/index_en.html