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Co-operating for a sustainable fishing future for the Mediterranean

**Opening speech to the Ministerial Conference on the Sustainable Development of
Fisheries in the Mediterranean**

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Ministers, dear colleagues, dear Mayor of Venice, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would also like to welcome you all, Ministers from Member States and third countries, Members of Parliaments and regional representatives to the Ministerial Conference on the Sustainable Development of Fisheries in the Mediterranean. Let me thank Minister Alemanno for his warm welcome and for co-organising this important conference with us. I cannot think of a better venue than Venice, the city of Canaletto, Carpaccio and Marco Polo, to hold the Ministerial Conference on the Sustainable Development of Fisheries in the Mediterranean. We should seek inspiration from Marco Polo, because he was the most famous Westerner that ever travelled the silk road. He excelled all other travellers in his determination, his writing and his influence. And it is exactly this determination we need in order to tackle the problems that our sea, the Mediterranean, is facing today. I hope that by the time we leave these stunning surroundings, we will have committed ourselves to concrete action to ensure the future of Mediterranean fisheries.

While we have already had two conferences on sustainable fishing in the Mediterranean - first, in 1994 in Crete and then in 1996 here in Venice, where we committed ourselves to work together for sustainable and responsible fisheries in the Mediterranean, it is this third conference which hopefully constitutes a mile stone. We should leave behind us the time of proclamations. We should here in Venice decide on concrete actions leading to the establishment of a multilateral marine resource management system for the Mediterranean.

Fishing plays an important economic, social and cultural role in the Mediterranean. In the European Union countries alone are over 100,000 fishermen employed and over 40,000 vessels operating. What are the difficulties we are facing?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Firstly, if you have a look at the graph portrayed on the screen, you see that over the last 10 years catches of commercial key stocks like hake have been in steep decline, despite the increase in fishing effort. The green line shows the total catches in the Mediterranean. You see that at first, catches increase due to an increase in fishing effort. But soon thereafter catches decline significantly for our fleets. You see now the same pattern for Norway Lobster. These are only a few examples. I am particularly concerned by the fact that we have too many juveniles in the catches and that the part of the fish stock that is mature enough to reproduce is very low for a number of species. The

conclusion is that with this kind of fishing pattern we are destroying many stocks. Then, the substantial scientific data that exist on fish stocks in the Mediterranean are not properly exploited and a great part of the Mediterranean Sea is still today international waters. This is a gap that needs to be filled.

In addition, we don't have an efficient control system in place and there is no way we can control what goes on in the international part of the Mediterranean.

And lastly as a consequence of this there is widespread illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing going on. If we don't act soon we risk a similarly bad situation in the Mediterranean, as the European Union faces with stocks in the North Sea and the Atlantic. You don't have to be a prophet to see what would happen. Commercially important stocks for our fishermen would decline. Income of fishermen would drop sharply. We would have less landings than today, posing problems for our processing industry. We would lose export markets and fishing villages around the Mediterranean be it the Adriatic or be it the Moroccan coast would greatly suffer.

We would be forced to import more fish than we do today, instead of harvesting it ourselves from the Mediterranean Sea. Against this background, how can we steer the policy towards a more sustainable fisheries management in the Mediterranean?

Firstly, we should reinvigorate the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean. It must become a real regional fisheries organisation and must be endowed with the appropriate human and financial resources to carry out its mission effectively. It must be able to take decisions in fisheries management of shared stocks and they must be implemented. Then we would be one step closer to our goal.

Secondly, we must agree in GFCM and further develop instruments to conserve fish stocks. Our objective is that the GFCM should start adopting measures as early as October 2004. This means that priorities have to be identified so that preparatory work can start for decisions on the measures to protect young fish throughout the Mediterranean, such as protected areas for young and spawning fish, identifying shared fishing zones and shared stocks which should be subject to common management measures; the circles on the map show where such zones could be; and regulating fishing effort in the most heavily-exploited fisheries.

Thirdly, we must collect and analyse scientific data within the Scientific Committee of GFCM and base our management decisions on them.

Fourthly, inside GFCM we must adopt monitoring and control measures. We are all too aware that for a fisheries management system to be effective, solid monitoring and control measures need to be in place. We need to identify guidelines for a common control scheme, which takes into account the specificities of the Mediterranean and overcomes historical differences. Honest fishermen rightly are out for justice. Their calls deserve to be effectively answered. The fight against illegal fishing must be a political priority and we must be relentless here. The illegal activity of a few, particularly the vessels flying flags of convenience, not only represents unfair competition, but also threatens the future of the whole Mediterranean fleet. In this area we have to establish mechanisms which allow to identify fishing vessels involved in illegal activities so that they can be brought to an end and perpetrators sanctioned.

Without these measures, there cannot be responsible fisheries in the Mediterranean and fraudsters will be the only winners.

This leads me to the question of fisheries protection zones. In the Community's view, we cannot achieve a significant improvement in fisheries management in the Mediterranean without extending the jurisdiction of coastal states beyond their territorial waters and creating larger fisheries protection zones. There cannot be sustainable management of fisheries resources in the Mediterranean without an effective control scheme and there can be no effective control scheme as long as most of the Mediterranean waters remain subject to the regime applicable to the high seas. Let me make it very clear: we are aiming at a co-ordinated extension of the jurisdiction as regards the exploitation of marine living resources and these only. It is also clear that we have to try and conserve as much as possible historical fishing patterns. This could be done through multilateral agreements in GFCM. The advantages of fisheries protection zones are that we can extend the rules on fisheries management. The countries bordering the Mediterranean can then also control vessels from third countries in such zones and thereby make sure that everybody sticks to the rules. In this way we can finally establish a level playing field in the Mediterranean that has been missing for such a long time. I hardly need to underline the fact that this is one of the major issues at stake in this conference.

Our officials have very well prepared the draft conclusions of our conference and I would like to thank them for their hard work. I count on your co-operation at this Venice Conference to subscribe to the draft conclusions that take into account our common views.

There is no doubt, however, that the approach that we are proposing today must be in line with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, particularly with regard to closed and semi-closed seas and the rights of States disadvantaged by geography. Co-operation is at the heart of this Convention. Any debate on who has the right to do what under international law would be unproductive. It is our duty to organise our co-operation as best as we can. I am particularly interested to hear your views about the possibility of establishing fisheries protection zones in the Mediterranean. Our approach must obviously be sensitive to the geopolitical specificities of each of the subregions involved. The Western Mediterranean, where Algeria, Malta and Spain have already extended their protection zones is a good example of what we are aiming at. I would like to urge the countries bordering the Adriatic Sea to pursue all possible efforts to co-operate in order arrive at an agreement for this particularly sensitive area. Unilateral actions send the wrong signals and create problems rather than solving them. Our efforts today to define a common approach to a number of important issues in Mediterranean fisheries will encourage fishermen across the region to establish cooperation networks. I would like to re-iterate my full support for the creation of a Mediterranean Association of Fisheries Professionals grouping operators from the whole region. The first international meeting of Mediterranean fishermen in Malta last September has paved the way for the setup of such an Association. More is planned for 2004. This initiative will provide the necessary boost to enhanced co-operation and awareness about management issues. It will also create a vehicle for full participation of fisheries professionals in the GCFM which I am convinced would benefit the functioning of this organisation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, with this conference we have come a long way towards multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean region - the political will is unmistakably present, initiatives on the ground are taking shape and more than ever, the precarious situation of our marine resources urges us on. Dante Alighieri once said: "The secret of getting things done is to act." We have to show that we are up to the challenge. If we want to succeed in our goal, we need the same endurance as Marco Polo, who travelled through Asia for 24 years before returning home to Venice, although with our modern means one would hope we reach our goal quicker than he has. We cannot afford to miss this chance. I am confident that this conference will take our efforts forward and that Venice will remain in our memory as the "serenisima" city where decisive action was taken in the quest for sustainable fisheries in the Mediterranean.

Thank you.