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EU initiative to strengthen consular protection for citizens outside the European Union

Thousands of EU citizens travel, work and study outside the EU each year. According to a Eurobarometer study published in 2006 only 23% of them are aware that they can turn to another Member State for help if their own Member State is not represented in that third country. Crises in recent years, such as the tsunami in 2004 and the Lebanon conflict in 2006, showed the need for action at EU level to improve the protection of Union citizens in the world. The Commission has adopted an Action Plan for the period 2007-2009 to help to make the right to consular protection a reality for all citizens.

"The right to consular protection is a concrete expression of Union citizenship. This Action Plan marks the beginning of a long-term strategy to better inform citizens of their rights and ensure that EU citizens are protected world-wide" stated Vice-President Frattini, Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security.

Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner underlined that: "We need to step up cooperation at EU level and work with Member States to protect our citizens".

A Union citizen travelling to or living in a third country where his or her Member State is not represented is entitled to protection by the diplomatic and consular authorities of any Member State on the same conditions as the nationals of that State. This fundamental right is enshrined in Article 20 of the Treaty.

Consular protection covers in particular assistance to solve individual problems for example in case of loss of passports or serious accidents but can also intervene when EU citizens' lives are in a concrete danger, as in case of natural catastrophes (i.e. the tsunami wave in South-East Asia) or wars (the Lebanese crises, for instance). The need for consular protection concerns potentially thousands of EU citizens each year. EU citizens make some 80 million trips per year outside Europe according to Eurostat. Between 30 and 50 million EU citizens live outside Europe. It is estimated that around 9% of the EU citizens travelling outside the EU go to countries where their Member State does not have a consular or diplomatic representation. This is 7 million EU citizens per year.

All 27 Member States are represented in only three countries outside the European Union: the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation and the United States of America. There are 18 countries in which no Member State is represented and 17 countries in which only one Member State is represented. This includes popular tourism destinations for Union citizens, such as Bahamas, Barbados and Maldives.

Providing consular protection is the responsibility of the Member States. With its Action Plan, the Commission aims to assist the Member States with this important task and proposes concrete measures for the period 2007-2009 based on three main objectives:

- ensure that all EU citizens are informed of their rights;
- clarify and reinforce the scope of protection and

- enhance cooperation and burden-sharing between Member States.

As a first measure, the Commission is recommending that the Member States reproduce the wording of Article 20 in passports so that citizens are informed of their rights. The Commission will also set up a web-site on consular protection to publish practical information, such as the contact details of Member States' representations in third countries.

Finally, as a pilot project, the Commission intends to propose the setting up of a "common office" in a Commission delegation in a third country in which few Member States are represented.

To find out more about Vice President Frattini's work please visit his website:

http://www.ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/frattini/index_en.htm