

Brussels, 7th January 2009

Antitrust: Commission confirms inspections in the smart card chip sector

The European Commission can confirm that on 21 October 2008 Commission officials carried out unannounced inspections at the premises of several smart card chips producers in several Member States. These chips are used for the production of smart cards, such as telephone SIM cards, bank cards and identity cards. The Commission has reason to believe that the companies concerned may have violated EC Treaty rules prohibiting practices such as price fixing, customer allocation and the exchange of commercially sensitive information (Article 81).

The Commission officials were accompanied by their counterparts from the national competition authorities.

Surprise inspections are a preliminary step in investigations into suspected cartels. The fact that the Commission carries out such inspections does not mean that the companies are guilty of anti-competitive behaviour; nor does it prejudge the outcome of the investigation itself. The Commission respects the rights of defence, in particular the right of companies to be heard in antitrust proceedings.

There is no strict deadline to complete cartel inquiries. Their duration depends on a number of factors, including the complexity of each case, the extent to which the undertakings concerned co-operate and the exercise of the rights of defence.