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Cooperation on disaster prevention, preparedness and response¹

The vast forest fires in the summer of 2007 highlighted the importance of preparedness and well-coordinated cross-border action in case of disasters in South-East Europe. A high-level conference on disaster preparedness and prevention will be held in Sofia in April 2008. The Commission will launch in the second half of 2008 a Disaster Risk Reduction Initiative to support capacity building of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey in this area.

The countries of the Western Balkans need to build up their capacity and to enhance regional cooperation in the field of civil protection and disaster prevention. This includes developing region-wide management information systems, acquiring emergency communication tools and other equipment, and improving the interoperability of civil protection services, fire brigades, hydrological and meteorological services, and the health sector.

The *Disaster Risk Reduction Initiative*, financed by €2 million yearly through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), will support capacity building of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey as well as data collection, processing and sharing and the preparation of a regional strategy. The programme will be implemented in close cooperation with other donors and stakeholders. These include the World Bank and the UN which are implementing a project in South East Europe for building up local capacity, developing weather forecasting and early-warning systems, investing in infrastructure and disaster mitigation measures and establishing a regional disaster insurance scheme.

The Commission will also encourage the candidate² and potential candidate³ countries to use the opportunities offered by the Community *Civil Protection Mechanism* and the *Civil Protection Financial Instrument*. The Mechanism facilitates preparedness for and response to major emergencies, while the Civil Protection Financial Instrument provides the legal basis for financing all EU activities in the field of civil protection.

The candidate countries will be able to take part in all Community activities in the field of civil protection, including calls for proposals, training programmes, simulation exercises and real-time response to requests for civil protection assistance through the Mechanism. Cooperation with the potential candidates could cover areas such as disaster risk reduction and monitoring, information and early-warning systems, emergency communication tools, increasing operational capacity and improving interoperability of civil protection services. The countries can also participate in trainings, seminars and exchange of experts.

¹ Fact sheet for the Commission Communication: "Western Balkans: enhancing the European perspective" See IP 378

² Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey

³ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia

A regional initiative, the *Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South-East Europe (DPPI SEE)* was launched under the Stability Pact. It has been developing an institutional framework and intensifying its actions on flood response, seismic hazards and on the creation of a Joint Emergency Response Unit and a disaster management training programme. Bulgaria, as Chair of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECF), will host a high-level conference on disaster preparedness and prevention in Sofia in April 2008. The Commission cooperates with the DPPI SEE and will seek to ensure that the regional initiatives are fully consistent with related Community actions.