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**Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Protection and
Promotion of Human Rights: Responsibilities and Effective Remedies
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Session II: The role of civil society in addressing human rights violations

Statement by the European Commission on Human Rights Defenders

The European Union has long taken the view that an active civil society and vigorous human rights defenders are essential to ensuring the protection and promotion of human rights worldwide. In order to make its support for human rights defenders more visible and enhance EU actions in support of human rights defenders, in June 2004 the Council adopted the **EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders**, which identify practical ways for the Union to support and assist Human Rights Defenders working in third countries.

The Guidelines make clear that the EU supports the principles contained in the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The Guidelines stress that, although the work of human rights defenders often involves criticism of government's policies and actions, governments should not see this as a negative. The principle of allowing room for independence of mind and free debate on a government's policies and actions is fundamental, and is a tried and tested way of establishing a better level of protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The activities of Human Rights Defenders have over the years become more recognised. While human rights defenders have increasingly been able to ensure greater protection for the victims of violations, this progress has been achieved at a high price. The defenders themselves have increasingly become targets of attacks and their rights are violated in many countries. The EU believes it is important to ensure the safety and protect the rights of human rights defenders. To this end, the Guidelines establish that the EU shall undertake a broad range of practical measures to protect human rights defenders.

The Guidelines mandate EU Heads of Mission to report regularly on the local human rights situation, and particularly on human rights defenders. EU missions are tasked to adopt a proactive policy towards human rights defenders through co-ordinating and sharing information on Human Rights Defenders, maintaining contact with Human Rights Defenders, including by receiving them in missions, providing Human Rights Defenders with visible recognition through appropriate visits and publicity; and observing trials of Human Rights Defenders.

The Guidelines also provide that the situation of Human Rights Defenders should be included in political dialogue with third countries. The EU is committed to raising the topic of human rights defenders during high-level political visits to third countries. Moreover, the Guidelines provide that EU will support the work of UN Special procedures, and notably the Special Representative on human Rights defenders, by

encouraging States to accept requests for country visits and promoting the use of UN thematic mechanisms by local human rights defenders.

It is vital, of course, that these measures do not merely remain on paper but are implemented in practice. The EU has taken a series of measures to translate the Guidelines into action. In 2004, a Manual was produced, which provides detailed guidance to EU missions on how to implement the Guidelines in practice. So far as financial support is concerned, within the framework of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the EU will provide financing to the amount of €16 million over the next four years for civil society projects in favour of human rights defenders and to respond to urgent protection needs of individual human rights defenders.

In 2006 the Council reviewed the implementation of the Guidelines and adopted Conclusions which set out sixty-four recommendations to improve awareness and implementation of the Guidelines. Practical measures which missions are tasked with include translating the Guidelines into local languages, devising local strategies for promotion of the Guidelines, designating a focal point for Human Rights Defenders, inviting Human Rights Defenders to meetings at missions, organizing joint press conferences with Human Rights Defenders, establishing rosters for trial observation, undertaking visits to Human Rights Defenders in remote regions and giving particular attention to the situation of women Human Rights Defenders.

To follow up these conclusions, EU Missions around the world are developing local strategies for the implementation of the Guidelines. The Council has recently conducted an examination of the local strategies which have already been completed and this work is ongoing. The EU hopes that the development of local strategies for the protection of human rights defenders worldwide will mark a further step towards ensuring that human rights defenders can conduct their invaluable work without intimidation.

The EU, under the Portuguese Presidency, will continue to focus, as have previous Presidencies, on the implementation of these Guidelines, raising awareness on the ground and striving for a pro-active attitude by EU Missions. While focusing attention on certain priority countries, the EU will remain vigilant concerning other situations that may arise, focusing on individual cases worldwide and making appropriate demarches, not only at local level but also in high-level political dialogue and in Human Rights Dialogues.