



The Presidency Conference on
Future European Union Co-operation in the Field of Asylum, Migration and Frontiers
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ASYLUM AND MIGRATION IN A SECURE EUROPE

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by welcoming you all, on behalf of the Dutch Presidency of the European Union, to the Hilton Hotel Amsterdam.

As some of you may perhaps be aware, this hotel was world famous for a while in 1969, when John Lennon and Yoko Ono held here their famous “bed-in for peace”, the motto of which was “Make love, not war”. For one week, they stayed in their bed in room 902, in order to promote world peace. My fear, though, is that this may not have done much good. It is good, however, to see that you did get out of your bed today in order to attend this conference, as, at the present time, we are faced with a major challenge – the challenge of putting together a new program for future collaboration within the European Union in the fields of freedom, security and justice.

This collaboration is sorely needed – also, or perhaps, above all, in the field of asylum, migration and frontiers. One thing is clear: no single Member State can go it alone. The migration issue is much too international for that. We have got to work together, as the world is changing. Better and increasing transport and communications channels have caused unprecedented streams of migrants to depart from their country of origin.

All European countries are currently engaged with issues relating to asylum and migration. And EU citizens take these issues very much to heart.

For this reason, the governments of individual Member States can be expected to give a clear response to the issues posed by international migration. During its Presidency of the EU, the Netherlands is keen to lead the way.

As the Netherlands Minister for Immigration and Integration, I will have responsibility during the coming months for the relevant part of the multi-annual programme to be discussed by the European Council on 5 November.

The programme is in fact still being developed and this is why I am glad that you all have chosen to attend this conference. After all, you are the experts who are able to make a significant contribution to the programme. We will listen with extra special interest to what you have to say.

This doesn't mean to say, however, that we are attending this conference without a purpose of our own. Quite the opposite; the Netherlands has a clear vision as to how the European Union should work together in the future to deal with issues such as asylum, migration and frontiers.

It is often suggested that the European Union has developed into a Fortress Europe. But that is not an image that I would wish to subscribe to, as not only is it difficult to get inside a fortress, but those already inside are unable to leave.

The last thing that this world needs is another Iron Curtain, dividing not East from West, but rich from poor.

I would rather see Europe as an open, safe haven. My own vision is of a Europe that is involved with the world and open to it. But at the same time, we must retain a firm focus upon security.

But how can we achieve this? Let me explain this by referring to a number of issues that in years to come will form an important part of EU policy. These are:

- Asylum/protection of asylum-seekers in the regions
- Illegal migration
- Border controls
- Legal migration, and
- Partnership with third countries.

Let us start with asylum.

In the past five years, we have created the outlines of a European asylum policy. Some of the discussions were completed quickly, whilst others proved very difficult. The purpose of the Treaty of Amsterdam was to lay down minimum standards for a common asylum system, and we succeeded in doing that.

I must however point out that the Treaty only sets out minimum standards. These standards do not yet resemble the common standards that we must strive to achieve during the next few years, but viewed in the slightly longer term, the European Union has already made a substantial and important achievement and one that only ten or fifteen years ago, would have been regarded as impossible.

The fact that the objectives of European asylum policy have been fully incorporated in the Constitutional Treaty forms a new milestone. The objectives have been implemented in the form of a uniform asylum status and common asylum procedures, thereby building upon the conclusions of the European Council in Tampere. And though the Constitution is not meant to take effect until 2006, we must already consider what will be its more far-reaching effects.

Europe stands for a high degree of protection, based upon the Refugee Convention and other international treaties. As far as this is concerned, we have a humanitarian tradition to maintain and we have every reason to be proud of that. But such a level of protection can only exist in conjunction with fast and effective procedures. This helps us to prevent the procedures for asylum from being abused. And that is necessary so as to maintain sufficient support for asylum as an institution within Europe.

But other measures are also necessary, such as accommodating asylum seekers in their region of origin. In many areas, there is considerable room for improvement in this regard.

Just spare a thought for example for the area around the Great Lakes in Africa, where even refugees housed in camps in neighbouring countries are now unsafe and are not being offered sufficient protection. A lot of work is already in hand in order to care for the refugees and to provide them with humanitarian aid. But improving protection in their region of origin is at least as important, however, and it is in this area that the European Union will face considerable challenges during the years to come. In the end, our aim must be to achieve durable solutions on a regional basis. And that will help to reduce the flow of migrants to Europe.

These flows of migration are frequently somewhat of a mixed bag, as they include illegal immigrants, but also asylum seekers, some of whom will in fact be genuine refugees. When they arrive on EU territory, we must be in a position to sift the migrants in a manner that is both rapid and equitable.

And this brings me to my second topic: **Illegal immigration**. This is a subject that recently enjoyed a lot of attention. And there is every reason for this. During the past few months, a number of dramatic events have taken place on the Mediterranean Sea. Hundreds of migrants, packed together in tiny boats, attempted to cross the Mediterranean in order to reach Europe. For many of these migrants, the sea turned out to be their burial place, whilst others were rescued and returned to their country of origin. But some did reach Europe and built up an existence as illegal immigrants.

On the Eastern and Southeastern borders of the EU, illegal migration over land is taking place on a massive scale. Some migrants take on massive debts in order to pay for their journey. Others fall victim to human trafficking and are put to work in atrocious conditions, for example in prostitution. Criminal organisations are growing rich on the backs of people such as these, whilst the money earned in this way is all too often used to fund other criminal activities.

Illegal immigration and illegal residency constitute a threat to the fabric of our society. Employers who recruit illegal immigrants or landlords who allow them to live in dilapidated accommodation are neglecting their obligations to society itself, whilst undermining the social security system. In addition, what is known as a “grey” economy then emerges, which, though it looks innocent enough, frequently has links to the criminal underworld. Illegal immigration therefore constitutes a threat to public order and the security of Europe itself.

And this brings me to the topic of **EU border controls**. Improving the border controls in Europe is an effective means of countering illegal immigration. But, as I said earlier: what we must not do is create a Fortress Europe. Europe must be open and must remain safe. This means that anyone must be able to enter or leave Europe, unless they have no right to be here. Anyone who needs a visa to enter Europe is required to appear at the border with his or her visa.

The security of Europe must be our first priority, certainly now that the fight against terrorism has become the centre of attention. Security can be enhanced by means of improved travel and residency documents and by incorporating biometric data. Setting up a co-ordinated Visa Information System is a significant step in this direction.

Major investment is necessary, however, in order to strengthen the border controls on the ground. The new Member States that were welcomed as members of the EU on 1 May must be able to join the Schengen area as soon as possible, in order that Europe’s internal borders in the Eastern part of the European Union may disappear.

Carrying out border controls on land and sea frontiers in the Southern and Eastern parts of the European Union still forms a major problem, however. Increased collaboration between Member States of the EU and neighbouring countries will continue to be a high priority during the years to come. The costs of border controls must also be shared on a more equitable basis. I am therefore expecting a great deal from the European Agency for the Management of the External Borders, which will become operational next year.

But we should not let ourselves become hypnotised by the negative effects of illegal immigration. Europe must also bear in mind that **legal migration** is a positive thing and can sometimes be a necessity. If migrants are able to become fully integrated into society, they are in a position to make a substantial contribution, both on a cultural and on an economic level.

The flows of migrants, now heading for Europe, are not made up in such a way that they fulfil all of the European Union’s needs and requirements. If the flows of migrants are well managed, supply and

demand can be brought into line with one another more easily. But we must recognise that the needs of each individual Member State are very different.

We must also realise that immigration alone is not a means to resolve the major demographic changes that Europe is now facing. Immigration can only form part of the solution.

Immigration is also able to contribute to the objectives of the Lisbon strategy, the purpose of which is to turn Europe into the most competitive economy in the world. And when we are thinking of the knowledge-based economy, exchanging ideas must be our first and foremost priority. And in order to exchange ideas, people must be able to get together. Innovation is only possible if it is possible to open the windows. And that is another reason why I do not wish to see a Fortress Europe.

Many migrants would like to enter the EU legally in order to take up employment. These range from top scientists to domestics, managers of large companies to seasonal workers in the agricultural sector. We must put in place clear and equitable procedures for all of these people, so that they are aware what lies ahead for them and so that Europe may benefit from their efforts.

And this brings me to my final theme: **Partnership with third countries**. Let there be no misunderstanding. A successful asylum and migration policy for Europe is not possible without collaborating with countries that are not members of the EU.

Whether we are talking of protecting refugees, countering illegal immigration or controlling our land, sea and air borders; or, whether we are referring to the temporary migration of workers, or the repatriation of migrants not allowed to remain within the EU: working together with countries of origin or transit countries is essential if we are to achieve our objectives.

And this realisation is now beginning to sink in more and more. Asylum and migration must become a fixed part of the EU's foreign policy. After all, migration flows do not exist in isolation, but can be the result of a number of diverse causes. For this reason, asylum and migration policy must be interwoven with other policy areas, such as development cooperation, agriculture, trade and security policy, for example. If our policy-making is not coordinated, the outcome will not match up to our expectations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What I have tried to do is to sketch an image of the tasks that are facing the EU during the years to come and of the vision that underpins the Dutch Presidency of the EU: not a Fortress Europe, but a safe haven.

A coordinated and common asylum and migration policy sounds very nice and has now become almost self-evident, but it remains a highly complex affair. We have taken a number of important steps, but we must keep moving forward and not, as we say in the Netherlands, flounder when the harbour is in sight.

Immigration is a phenomenon that has come to form an integral part of our society. And we must not seek to put a stop to it. Instead, let us ensure that immigration takes place in a clear and flexible way.

This means that we must admit, with a minimum of delay, those migrants coming to Europe to do essential jobs, and must continue to take in refugees and others who are entitled to our protection, both in their region of origin, but also in Europe itself.

But it also means is that we must set clear and unambiguous boundaries and maintain them, whilst making it quite clear that illegal immigration is not the way forward. We must prevent and discourage the abuse of our procedures. Even within our migration policy, security must come first, so that we may all continue to live in freedom.

And finally, if I may continue our analogy of the harbour just a little longer, we must not burn our boats behind us. Good relationships with third countries are, and will remain, essential if our asylum and migration policies are to remain effective.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope you will all have a very successful conference and I am convinced that your knowledge will bring forth inspiring and refreshing ideas.

During the next three days, we are faced with a choice: do we stay in bed or do we roll up our sleeves and get on with the job? I would recommend the latter, so that then, in ten or fifteen years' time, another minister will be able to stand here in my place and conclude that we brought about a monumental achievement that at the time was thought impossible. And then you will be able to say: "I was part of that".

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