

Brussels, 21 March 2011

Mr H. Van Rompuy
President of the European Council

Dear President,

With a view to some of the topics which the European Council is going to address on 24-25 March, namely the Southern Neighbourhood and Japan, I believe it would be useful to inform you without delay of the main orientations resulting from the debate of Energy Ministers in this respect during their Extraordinary Council today. I have already informed my colleague chairing the GAC along the same lines.

In order to ground this debate on facts rather than on the emotion that the tragic events in Japan and Libya has legitimately triggered I have asked the Commission to provide the Council with factsheets on the Japanese nuclear power plants and on the consequences of recent international developments on energy markets. They were useful in outlining the state of play from where our debate could proceed.

I will first of all note that, irrespective of the countries concerned and of the reasons - natural or political - of the sufferings endured by their peoples, a strong message of solidarity, compassion and readiness to provide humanitarian as well as technical assistance, came from the interventions.

It is obviously important to communicate to the public on these developments and their consequences, without hiding facts: in so doing we should however avoid sending out alarmist messages.

Then, regarding the consequences of recent international developments in North Africa, especially Libya, and Japan on energy markets and the EU supplies, Member States have been able so far to cope with the consequences on oil and gas markets. EU solidarity mechanisms are in place and operational. We should however not be complacent and keep these developments under close watch regarding both quantities and prices.

I turn now to the issue which is attracting most of the public concerns at present, namely the situation of the nuclear sector in Japan and how the EU should respond to it. I should highlight that all participants confirmed that implementing and continuously improving high standards for nuclear safety is our priority and acknowledged the need for an effective response, even though we don't have yet a full analysis of the situation in Japan which would allow the EU to draw valuable lessons from the accident. Indeed, as you know, several Member States and industry operators have already decided to review the safety of their nuclear plants, which should be welcomed.

This response would take the form of a comprehensive risk and safety assessment (so-called stress-test) of nuclear plants in Europe, for which the scope and modalities should be developed in light of the recent events ("lessons learnt") and making full use of the expertise available, notably from WENRA. As to the scope, the following core areas could possibly be addressed by the assessment, while noting that each nuclear plant has its own specificities: flood risks, seismic risks, back-up systems, emergency procedures. The Member States and the Commission invite the European Nuclear Safety Regulatory Group (ENSREG), with the full involvement of Member States, to define the modalities of this assessment, in consultation with the relevant stakeholders. It is thus also essential to improve the cooperation between regulators. The input provided by the High level conference convened on 15 March at the Commission's initiative was duly noted and its work should be continued.

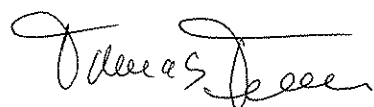
While, in the absence of a full analysis of the accident, it might be difficult to set a firm date the need to respond to public concerns would call for the assessment to be underway as soon as possible. The priority to the safety of nuclear plants should obviously not stop at the EU borders: it will therefore be important to associate the EU neighbouring third countries to this assessment, regarding both existing and planned plants, and to make full use of international organisations and bodies to engage these countries.

Last but not least, however dramatic the situation in Japan the public should not have the impression that nuclear safety is left only to the devices of individual actors: it is thus important to recall that there is already a legally binding framework in place in Europe in this field, to be shortly complemented with an instrument on waste management.

In the same vein, the credibility of this exercise requires that we are transparent about the modalities and outcome of the assessment.

All the above clearly demonstrates the need for the full implementation of the orientations agreed by the EC and the TTE Council last February. Given the importance of the matter we will return to it at our June meeting.

Yours sincerely,



Tamás Fellegi

Minister of National Development