

## EU/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL Still no free trade agreement

By Sébastien Falletti

After 17 years of negotiations, the EU and the Gulf States are still struggling to conclude a free trade agreement. The EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) pressed for a rapid conclusion, during their annual meeting held on 8 May in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, but noted that progress would still have to be made. "I have the impression that we are reaching the final stage," said Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German minister of foreign affairs currently in charge of the EU's rotating Presidency.

"We do not have much further to go, but we are not quite there yet," said the Director General of DG Trade, David O'Sullivan, to MEPs in the European Parliament's International Trade Committee on May 7 in Brussels, adding that final agreement was just a matter of months away. Discussions have hit problems on the issue of services and rules for setting up foreign companies in the Gulf region. During the last round of negotiations that started in April, the European Commission noted some progress in the wording of the text but is waiting for written confirmations and clarifications from

the GCC. A new round of talks is scheduled for June.

The meeting in Riyadh has permitted discussions on political issues and on the Middle East situation in particular, while Saudi Arabia is carrying out diplomatic initiatives to relaunch the peace process. The EU wishes to reinforce its political relations with the GCC, but has recalled the importance of concluding trade negotiations to move ahead. The GCC that was set up in 1981 brings together Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman and represents a population of 32 million people. ■

# In Brief

## PAPERLESS CUSTOMS

The EU Council reached political agreement on 8 May on a draft decision that would implement interoperable and accessible automated customs systems and coordinating processes and services ('paperless customs'). The new draft decision will be forwarded to the European Parliament for a second reading. Paperless customs are envisaged for when the modernised EU Customs Code enters into force. The system has obvious benefits, noted the Council, such as facilitating import and export procedures, reducing administrative costs and improving clearance times, thereby enabling the seamless flow of data between the authorities of exporting and importing countries as well as between customs authorities and economic operators. Despite the benefits, the rapporteur on paperless customs, Christopher Heaton-Harris (EPP-ED, UK), had accused the Council of «penny-pinching» as member states were reluctant to make necessary investments estimated by the European Commission at some €161 million in 2007-2013. (DAI)

## CAMPAIGN TO PROMOTE ESC IN CARS

A European campaign to promote the use of the Electronic Stability Control system in cars was launched in Rome

on 8 May. The event was attended by Commissioners Viviane Reding (information society) and Günter Verheugen (enterprise and industry). Fitting cars with ESC (a technology which helps reduce loss of control of vehicles) is not currently obligatory, hence the idea for the campaign to make motorists aware of this driving aid. But it would appear that this is about to change. A recent communication has expressed the Commission's desire to make ESC compulsory. "The Commission sees 'Choose ESC!' as the first step towards all new cars fitted with ESC by 2012," confirmed Reding. (ISM)

## ORBAN CITES NEED FOR MORE RESOURCES

The EU Commissioner for Multilingualism, Leonard Orban, has given assurances that there should be "no discrimination" in the importance allocated to each of the EU's three procedural languages. In meetings with the regional government of Baden Württemberg (Germany), on 8 May, he responded to concerns regarding the translation of official documents into German, noting that existing resources will not allow for a "significant amelioration of output". He cited the eventual need to extend the linguistic services in Brussels in

order to achieve a complete translation. The commissioner also gave some indications as regards his strategy for 2008, noting that he intends to explore "the contribution of multilingualism to competitiveness, growth, employment, social integration of migrants as well as fostering lifelong learning and intercultural dialogue". (JBR)

## BLUEFIN TUNA: WWF FURIOUS

"The European Union has failed to grasp its final opportunity this year to save bluefin tuna from collapse in the Mediterranean," fumed Gemma Parkes, communications officer, WWF Mediterranean, after learning that the European Fisheries Council, on 7 May, decided to postpone all decisions on the multi-annual plan for recovering tuna stocks until 11 June (see *Europolitica* 3303). Given that the current provisional quota in force for the EU of 9,398 tonnes, allocated in December 2006, will be reached within the next few days, the WWF has called for the immediate closure of the fishery and has accused the EU of "blocking its ears" and not heeding warnings from international scientists. Meanwhile, WWF congratulates fishing nation Norway's bold move last week to ban the fishing of bluefin tuna by its fleets as a last-ditch attempt at conservation, in light of the critical situation of the stock. (AEC)