

# Light in a Sombre Mediterranean Year

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One year in the life of the Mediterranean is only an instant in geological time, but in human and political terms 2003 has been noteworthy in many ways. Clearly we cannot ignore the fact that tragedy has cast a dark shadow over the area. The enduring conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has continued to claim innocent lives and poison relations, while the war in Iraq has further exacerbated tensions across the region. Nonetheless, the picture is not all dark and I would like to highlight some of the brighter points.

From the EU's point of view for instance, there is the fact that three Mediterranean countries, Cyprus, Malta and Slovenia, were among the States that signed the Accession Treaty on 16th May, and at the time of writing (9th October) two have already given notice of ratification. All signs indicate that the European Union's most spectacular enlargement will go ahead successfully, so turning the page on the continent's long-standing division between east and west. Meanwhile, I still hope to see popular pressure in Cyprus bring a settlement that will ultimately mean bring the entire island may be brought into the Union.

Alongside and flowing naturally out of the EU's enlargement strategy is the Union's Proximity Policy. It stems from the Europeans' desire to share with the countries on the EU's new borders the benefits brought by fifty years of inte-

gration. The political stability forged as a result of a range of factors, such as the rule of law, democratic institutions, harmonised legislation and standards, a strong civil society, robust media and improved governance, has generated the prosperity that we enjoy within the Union and which we wish to share with our neighbours. This aspiration is both a natural human reaction and the result of logical reasoning, because we know that in our modern world, security depends as much or more on sound social and political dynamics than it does on stockpiled military hardware and standing armies.

In other areas too, the European Commission that I lead has sought to underpin stability and security in the Mediterranean through a range of soft-security measures. The Barcelona Process is making progress; association agreements are being signed and ratified with our Mediterranean partner countries; a loan facility available to Mediterranean member countries has been set up within the European Investment Bank; and there are also advances in higher education and culture. A Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for intercultural dialogue is currently on the drawing board, and I hope that a decision will be taken concerning this project at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference in Naples in December. In October I attended the Tempus MEDA Conference in Alexandria, where the Higher Education Ministers of the Mediterranean partner countries discussed future prospects, since the Tempus programme has been extended to include their countries. And at the same conference, the High-

Level Advisory Group on Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures discussed their draft report that I commissioned. It will put forward a set of practical measures targeted at reinvigorating dialogue between all the peoples living on the Mediterranean shores, and with the immigrant communities living in our societies in Europe who originate from Mediterranean countries.

Sceptics may see such efforts as vain, when set against the horrendous impact of terrorism and modern warfare. Yet these efforts prepare the ground for healthy, constructive relations, that are the necessary basis for resolving greater conflicts. The solution may not be there tomorrow, but it will never be there at all if we do not prepare for it. For this reason my Commission has chosen the path of dialogue as the only way forward.

The Mediterranean is an ancient sea with many faces. Beneath its often deceptively impassive surface lie treacherous silt-filled shallows and dark gloomy troughs that are stirred by dangerous currents and sudden squalls. But those same currents often show a happier, sunnier side, and when the sunbeams glance off the waves between the *vaporetti* speeding across the lagoon in Venice, or the fishing boats put in to their home ports in the Levant or the Maghreb, their nets laden with the day's catch, we can see the waves return to their more joyous self. That is the Mediterranean that I want to see regain its unity in peace, prosperity and stability, through dialogue, development and mutual respect.