

EU-Latin America summit voices concern over food prices

The European Union-Latin America-Caribbean (EU-LAC) summit stressed in its final declaration in Lima that participants were 'deeply concerned by the impact of increased food prices', specifically citing troubled Haiti as an example.

'We agree that immediate measures are needed to assist the most vulnerable countries and populations affected by high food prices,' the Lima declaration said Friday.

EU Foreign Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said in the Peruvian capital that soaring global food prices constitute 'a regional challenge'. The EU has approved a package worth 117.25 million euros (\$183 million) for food aid around the world, Waldner said.

The declaration signed by 60 countries at the end of the meeting focussed on the fight against poverty and climate change, and expressed support for Haiti.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas, with 70 percent of its nearly nine million people living in poverty. Six people were killed and a further 268 injured last month in Haiti during riots over high food prices, and the prime minister was forced to resign over his handling of the crisis.

The Lima declaration stressed 'the efforts by the Haitian government and people to revitalise the state institutions and combat poverty, inequality and social injustices', while acknowledging the need for 'urgent and effective continued action by the international community on behalf of rehabilitation and development in Haiti'.

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero called on Latin America to implement 'fairer' income distribution policies.

'Overcoming poverty, inequality and exclusion is crucial for the attainment of social cohesion, for sustainable development and for the effectiveness of our bi-regional partnership,' the declaration stressed.

In his opening address, Peruvian President Alan Garcia addressed the other intended focus of the meeting, climate change, and mentioned an initiative to tax oil and natural gas to raise money to pay for reforestation.

The final declaration stressed that 'environmental degradation and climate change seriously affect' economic growth, 'hitting the poor hardest and seriously threatening the prospects' for the world's future.

Of the delegations present at the summit at the National Museum in Lima, 37 were lead by prime ministers or heads of state. Some key European leaders were conspicuously absent, including French President Nicolas Sarkozy and prime ministers Gordon Brown of Britain and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy.

Debate took place behind closed doors. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who had sparred verbally in the preceding week after Chavez made Nazi comparisons to the German leader, shook hands and even spoke briefly during the meeting.

Spain is set to host the next EU-LAC summit in 2010.

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