

Nine newcomers ready to join Schengen

The way is free for Schengen borderless zone expansion within the European Union, Portuguese Deputy Interior Minister Jose Magalhaes told reporters here.

Experts had agreed in Brussels that all nine newcomers to the zone are ready to join, and 'it is not a vague conclusion - it means each and every state is prepared,' Magalhaes told DPA Friday after a meeting with his counterparts in Prague.

While the evaluation report, to be made public in November, includes recommendations, 'none of them implies that the states have not done their homework', he said.

The European Parliament was thus expected to approve the enlargement in December and EU interior ministers would follow suit in the same month.

Nine of the 10 countries that joined the EU in 2004 would be then allowed to join the zone as soon as Dec 21, when land and sea border controls would be scrapped. Air borders would stay put until March 31, 2008 as planned.

Eighteen interior ministers of current and upcoming member states of the borderless zone met in Prague Friday to debate how all Schengen members adopt an upgraded version of the zone's information system, one of the key requirements for the area's expansion.

All current and future Schengen members have been connected to the system, through which since Aug 31 they have been sharing information such as data on missing or wanted people.

As it became clear that waiting for a new generation of the information system would delay the expansion, Portugal suggested connecting the newcomers to an updated version.

'If it were not solved, our presidency would be a nightmare,' Magalhaes, whose country currently presides over the European Union, told DPA.

The members-to-be are the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Cyprus, which also joined the EU in 2004, will not be joining and neither will Bulgaria and Romania, who became EU members in 2007.

Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden belong to the current 15 members of the Schengen zone. All current members except Norway and Iceland are European Union members.

People can travel freely within the zone from one country to another without border controls. Trips by air, road and train are handled as domestic trips.

The zone is named after a small town in Luxembourg where seven European Union countries signed an initial treaty to end internal border checkpoints and controls in June 1985.

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