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German Council Presidency welcomes the entry into force of the extension of Europol's operational powers

In a ceremony today, Federal Minister of the Interior Dr Wolfgang Schäuble and the Vice-President of the European Commission, Mr Franco Frattini, handed over the three protocols amending the Europol Convention, which entered into force and have now been ratified by all Member States, to the Director of Europol, Max-Peter Ratzel.

The amending protocols 1 and 2 of 2000 and 2002 had already entered into force on 29 March 2007; by contrast, the 3rd amending protocol of 2003 only entered into force on 18 April, two days before today's meeting of the Council of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers in Luxembourg. The amending protocols will adapt Europol to the challenges of the modern fight against crime and will decisively increase its efficiency. This is why Europol was also an important topic at the Council meeting of the home affairs ministers.

Federal Minister Dr Wolfgang Schäuble emphasized:

“With the protocols amending the Europol Convention, Europol has embarked on a new operational phase. The protocols contain numerous improvements for Europol's daily work.

For example, participation of Europol officers in joint investigation teams is now possible under the second amending protocol. This enables Europol to support the Member States in the fight against terrorism, drug crime or Euro counterfeiting even more efficiently than before. Europol officers may make information from ongoing Europol analysis files directly available to the joint investigation team. Vice versa, it

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will also be possible for Europol to directly receive and process topical information from the joint investigation team. In addition, Europol will also be given the possibility to request individual Member States to institute criminal investigations.

The third amending protocol opens up the possibility to give other competent authorities of the Member States direct access to the Europol information system, in addition to the national central units. Along these lines the exchange of information with Europol is being improved further and the acceptance of Europol substantially increased in the Member States. Direct access will also prevent frictional losses and transmission errors as well as other delays. By late May 2007 we will create the legal prerequisites in Germany for granting public prosecutors, customs authorities and the Federal Police such access.

Under the third amending protocol there is also the possibility to involve experts from third countries directly in the work of an analysis group of the Member States at Europol. This is of the greatest significance, e.g. in the cooperation with the USA in the important field of counter-terrorism.

Our task is now to make intensive use of the possibilities offered by the amending protocols. This applies both to Europol and to the Member States' law enforcement authorities. We hope to be able to have the first joint investigation teams and analysis groups start their work with experts from third countries in the next months. I have asked Europol's director to keep the Council up to date on this issue.“

Alongside these options for increased cooperation between the Member States and Europol, potential progress in the joint fight against the use of the Internet for radicalisation, recruitment and incitement to criminal offences of terrorists is another topic at the Council meeting. The “check the web” project initiated by the German Council Presidency provides for an information portal at Europol as a central tool, which will go into operation in early May. It is intended to facilitate the division of labour among the Member States in monitoring the Internet.

Another important item of today's Council meeting is the transformation of the Europol Convention into a Council decision. In this process, the intention is to achieve further operational improvements – beyond the contents of the amending protocols. Hence Europol's mandate should be extended to cover all forms of serious cross-border crime. Another important aspect in the framework of integrating Europol into the EU's legal framework is the question whether the annual budget of the

authority should be covered from the general Community budget. This would have far-reaching consequences which will still have to be reviewed thoroughly.

Strengthening Europol is one of the major objectives of the German EU Council Presidency in the field of interior policy issues.