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**This is a press release from the European Commission**

**Ceci est un communiqué de presse de la Commission Européenne**

The President of the European Commission, José Manuel Durao Barroso, and Prime Minister of the Republic of Iraq, Nouri Al-Maliki, met today to discuss enhanced cooperation between the Commission and Iraq. This was the first meeting between the two and resulted in an understanding concerning energy cooperation, support for the efforts of the Iraqi government in fighting terrorism, building up the democratic institutions, enforcing rule of law and upgrading the capacities of key Iraqi state institutions, and additional aid to help Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons.

During the meeting, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki gave his personal assessment of the recent turbulent developments in Iraq and his government's strategy in addressing the situation in the country. *Al-Maliki said: "The recent events in Basrah were an evidence of Iraqis' determination to establish rule of law and respect for human rights. It also showed that Iraqis have gone beyond sectarian tensions in their efforts to build a united, stable, and prosperous country. The National unity expressed during the recent operations by all political forces and tribes, opened the doors wide for the political progress Iraq requires at this crucial stage in its history. Our visit today shows that the federal, united, and stable Iraq is keen to build a strong partnership with Europe based on mutual interests and long term cooperation.*

Barroso said "The Commission is firmly committed to doing all it can to help Iraq tackle the substantial challenges it is facing. We are keen to establish a new and lasting basis for cooperation with Iraq and the Iraqi people. The future Trade and Cooperation Agreement will enable us embark on cooperation covering a wide range of areas. Energy in particular is a key element for Iraq's economic development, and the EU energy market - as the largest integrated market in the world - offers both sides major opportunities. Therefore we need to work on establishing a full energy partnership between the EU and Iraq, and hope to conclude a Memorandum of Understanding in the near future. Meanwhile the Commission will continue to play the fullest possible role in rebuilding a stable and prosperous Iraq."

Prime Minister Al-Maliki and President Barroso agreed that the current challenges in Iraq can be addressed by full international & regional support of Iraqi government efforts in fighting terrorism and enforcing rule of law. Increasing the capacities of the Iraqi institutions to efficiently and effectively provide the Iraqi people with basic services, job opportunities and promote a society based on rule of law and the respect for human rights are also essential. Therefore the Commission will look to include in its 2008 financial support package technical assistance to the key ministries and institutions to increase their capacity.

Prime Minister al-Maliki and President Barroso also discussed the difficulties facing the many Iraqis who have been forced to flee their homes in recent years. The Iraqi

government is doing its utmost to create the necessary atmosphere for their safe and voluntary return. The European Commission will continue to pay specific attention to the plight of these Iraqis both in the neighboring countries and Iraq by the provision of all forms of assistance to alleviate their difficulties. The Iraqi government will facilitate within the full extent of its capacity the delivery of that aid to the most vulnerable citizens.

Both Prime Minister al-Maliki and President Barroso welcomed the ongoing negotiations on a Trade and Cooperation Agreement, launched in November 2006, and undertook to work for their speedy conclusion. Such an agreement would establish the first ever contractual relations between the EU and Iraq and would facilitate further cooperation between the two partners in the medium to long-term, as well as supporting Iraq's integration into the international economy. The two sides also confirmed the launch of negotiations on energy cooperation, especially in the field of natural gas.

Finally, looking ahead to next week's ministerial meeting of the Iraq 'Neighbours Process', Prime Minister al-Maliki and President Barroso encouraged all neighbouring countries to play a constructive role, through the elected government, in contributing to peace and stability in Iraq, and recalled that Iraq's security and stability are vital for the region and the international community as a whole.

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