

MEASURES IN RESPONSE TO CHOLERA (G/SPS/GEN/53)

Statement by the European Community at the Meeting on 12 and 13 March 1998

1. The European Community has taken precautionary action with respect to imports of certain foodstuffs from Mozambique, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, owing to the current cholera epidemic in those four countries.
2. In deciding on its position the European Community was guided by the document "WHO Guidance on Formulation of National Policy on the Control of Cholera", and in particular Chapter IX thereof, "Cholera and International Trade in Food". That chapter clearly states that fishery products harvested or caught in cholera-affected areas can be contaminated. The same applies to vegetables and fruit growing near to the ground, when transport time is less than ten days. The chapter ends with the following sentence "*Vibrio cholerae* 01 may survive in frozen foods for longer periods. Such foods pose a risk to the consumer if they are eaten raw or are allowed to contaminate other foods".
3. In these two cases, where WHO has identified a potential consumer risk, the recommendation is not to ban imports of such products but for the exporting country and the importing country to reach agreement on the application of precautionary measures or specific requirements. The European Community has always given preference to this approach, which consists in shifting the responsibility for the application of good hygienic practices as defined by the Codex Alimentarius to the competent authorities of the exporting country.
4. In the present case, the Commission sent an expert mission to the countries in order to evaluate the capacity of the competent authorities to apply these good hygienic practices for the harvesting and production of fishery products. The mission found that substantial progress had to be made by the competent authorities and that it was therefore not yet possible to reach an agreement with the importing countries as recommended by WHO.
5. Pending such improvements, the Commission proposed to the member States that the products concerned be subjected to import controls in order to verify by sampling the absence of *Vibrio cholerae* contamination. Hence, this is not an embargo but a time-limited measure to control the healthiness of imported foods, within the responsibility of the member States, and in conformity with our international obligations under the WTO and in particular the SPS Agreement.
6. With regard to fresh fishery products, the technical impossibility of carrying out the necessary microbiological tests sufficiently rapidly in order to avoid their decomposition did indeed lead the Commission to propose the temporary suspension of imports. The Commission strongly encourages the experts to develop a rapid test method. In addition, the competent national authorities of the exporting countries have undertaken to provide guarantees of the application of good hygienic practices and make good the shortcomings found by the European Community's expert mission, in particular with respect to the quality of water used in food production. Once these guarantees have been received

the Commission will propose to the member States an easing of the routine control measures with respect to the import of fishery products.

7. In conclusion, the European Community considers that it has not in any way contravened the WHO recommendations with regard to the protection of its consumers in connection with the risk from contamination of certain foodstuffs by *Vibrio cholerae*. In addition, the Commission's services are preparing a document to establish a uniform policy on imports of foodstuffs from cholera-affected countries, based on a risk analysis approach.

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