Thanks to the Convention of Government negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations Special Representative, Achille Albinistah, to whom I wish to pay tribute, a power-sharing arrangement which provides for the ample inclusion of the opposition has been in place since September 1994. Regrettably, however, extremists on both sides have persisted in attempting to undermine the country’s institutions and continued to perpetrate bloody atrocities; and, on numerous occasions, according to consistent eye-witness accounts, the conduct of the army and the police has been the opposite of what might be expected.

In Burundi, as in the rest of the region, the current situation is extremely fragile. I shall give a few examples, which will be fresh in Members’ minds: the renewed exodus to Tanzania of 50 000 Rwandans, who had been seeking refuge in northern Burundi since the tragic events of last year; the flight to Zaïre of part of the population of Bujumbura, following the violence in that city during the weekend of 24 to 26 March; the clashes in the provinces of Bujumbura and the numerous bloody confrontations between the forces of law and order and the local population in the north of the country.

In the face of the deterioration of the situation, the European Union’s Council of Ministers has stepped up its efforts to help restore peace and foster national reconciliation. In parallel to the delegation of the UN Security Council, a delegation of the Council presidency went to Bujumbura on 10 and 11 February this year, in a bid to encourage the forces of moderation and warn the extremists against any attempt to destabilize the country. On this occasion, which in a sense represented the first official contact since the worsening of the crisis, the Burundian authorities presented the EU delegation with a set of requests for assistance in restoring the rule of law and establishing stability in their country.

The situation in Burundi was discussed at the informal meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers in Caracasonne, at which time three lines of action were agreed.

The first is to establish a permanent international presence on the ground without delay. This was accomplished by the visit of the Troika — to which I shall return later — and the subsequent visit of the French Cooperation Minister, Mr Djele. Further visits are planned, in continuation of these initiatives.

The second is to foster economic and social development and to strengthen the rule of law in Burundi.

The third is to encourage efforts to find a lasting political settlement within the framework of a regional conference — a conference in which, we believe, the Organization of African Ministers must play a major role.

On 24 March, on the basis of the principles laid down at the Caracasonne meeting, the Council adopted a common position, within the framework of the CSIP, comprising the following specific measures:

- support for the organization of a national debate on the problems of reconciliation;
- backing for Burundi’s request to the United Nations to set up an international judicial committee of inquiry, with a view to prosecuting those responsible for the coup d’état of October 1993 and the subsequent massacres;
- support for the sending of human rights experts to underpin the action of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights;
- backing for the strengthening of Burundi’s judicial system, notably through aid for the training of magistrates;
- support for the diplomatic initiatives of the Organization of African Unity;
- assistance towards the economic rehabilitation of Burundi by means of the rapid organization of a donors’ conference and implementation of the action plan adopted two months ago by the regional conference on aid for refugees, held in Bujumbura.

Furthermore, the declaration issued by the Council in Caracasonne envisages a series of measures designed to limit population displacements and curtail the machinations of extremists, as well as support for the organization of a conference on the problems of security, stability and peace in the region known as the ‘Great Lakes’.

Immediately after the definition of this common position, on 24 March, the French Minister for Cooperation led a visit of the Troika to Burundi. He returned to that country on 28 March, and spent two days pursuing bilateral efforts to foster the restoration of trust between the representatives of the state institutions and the people of Burundi. These steps were taken with the full agreement of the representatives of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity. Our European partners represented in Bujumbura — Belgium and Germany, that is, as well as the Commission — were associated with these initiatives.

These measures resulted, on 30 March, in a joint commitment on the part of the President and Prime Minister of Burundi to take all possible steps to establish peace and security. Both of them — and the House will be aware that they are of different ethnic origins — firmly condemned the schemes of the extremists and pledged to carry out the systematic disarming, with full respect for human rights, of those in illegal possession of weapons.

It is now a question of implementing the measures decided by the Fifteen as quickly as possible. In this spirit, the Council presidency has approached both the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the OAU, with a view to supporting their respective programmes.

The European Union is also taking steps to encourage the United Nations Development Programme and its partners in Burundi to organize without delay the proposed donors’ conference, whose purpose will be to support the economic reconstruction and development of that country.

Finally, we are insisting on a return to disciplined and impartial conduct on the part of Burundi’s forces of law and order. It goes without saying that the Council presidency is encouraging all its partners within the European Union and beyond to participate and play an active role in these initiatives.

The rapid deterioration of the situation in Burundi is leading us to step up our efforts. In this context, we welcome the declaration made by the President of the UN Security Council on 29 March — a declaration which was largely inspired by that issued by the Council in Caracasonne. Anything which helps to promote national dialogue in Burundi is to be welcomed. I shall end by saying that the crisis in Burundi will, of course, be one of the main topics on the agenda of the meeting of the General Affairs Council, to be held in Luxembourg next Monday. In its approach to this situation, the Council will take full account of the resolution adopted by the European Parliament this morning.