

European leaders deal with sluggish economies

BRUSSELS, Belgium (AP) — European Union leaders turned their attention to their sluggish economies Friday after agreeing to tough new counterterrorism measures and relaunching stalled talks on an EU constitution.

The 25 European leaders, including those from the 10 countries that will join May 1, were discussing ways to create jobs and make European business and workers more competitive, with pledges to implement more reforms.

They also were addressing foreign policy issues including Iraq, Kosovo and the Middle East over lunch on the final day of a two-day summit.

Leaders agreed late Thursday to a new anti-terror action plan and

restart constitution talks after a renewed sense of unity after the deadly rail bombings in Madrid.

"The tragic events of two weeks ago, it has certainly made people reflect and contemplate," Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern said Thursday night.

"This has been a difficult few weeks for Europe," he said. "There was pressure on all of us."

The leaders picked former Dutch government official Gijs de Vries as the bloc's first anti-terror czar to bolster the continent's defense after the March 11 bombings in Madrid, which are suspected to have been carried out by Islamic radicals.

De Vries will coordinate work done by the EU's foreign affairs and interior departments in an echo of

the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which was created in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

De Vries, a former deputy interior minister, was born in New York and holds dual U.S.-Dutch citizenship. He will start work Monday and report to Javier Solana, who heads the EU's foreign and security department.

Other measures adopted included improving police and intelligence cooperation and increasing border controls and tracking of phone records.

On the constitution, Ahern said leaders agreed to try for a deal by June 17 — six months after the draft was supposed to have been approved. "I tasked colleagues to commit to a timeframe ... and we agreed

to do so," Ahern said.

Ahern, whose country holds the EU presidency, will pursue one-on-one negotiations with a view to sorting out the most divisive issues before convening another summit.

Talks collapsed last December after Poland and Spain, which would have seen their power reduced, refused to go along.

The constitution must be agreed unanimously by all 25 current and soon-to-be EU members.

EU officials acknowledge that another collapse in talks this year would spell disaster for the 465-article draft, which was put together by a 105-member constitutional convention over the past two years.

Optimism has surged since the March 14 election defeat of Spanish Prime Minister Jose-Maria Aznar's conservative party by Jose

Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, a Socialist, who is more eager to find a breakthrough. As a result, Poland also eased its opposition to the charter.

"The Polish government is open to dialogue," said Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller.

In addition to a voting formula, Ahern said about 20 items remained to be resolved, including the size of the EU's executive commission and the number of European Parliament seats.

"I think we can get a basis for agreement on those," he said.

The constitution is meant to streamline decision making in a bloc of 25 nations and bolster its role on the world stage, with the creation of an EU president and foreign minister. It also boosts defense cooperation.

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State's wheat condition improving

WICHITA (AP) — Winter wheat condition improved slightly over last week, with less of the crop lost to winter kill than earlier thought, Kansas Agricultural Statistics Service said this week.

In its weekly crop weather report, the agency said 6 percent of the Kansas wheat crop has been lost to winter kill, slightly better than the 7 percent that had been estimated last week.

Wheat condition was rated as 11

percent very poor, 17 percent poor, 30 percent fair, 36 percent good and 6 percent excellent.

About 72 percent of the crop has suffered no freeze damage, and 67 percent shows no wind damage. About 70 percent shows no insect infestation.

But Army cutworms remain present throughout central Kansas. Spraying continues with treated wheat recovering nicely, the state's agricultural statistics service said.

Spring planting is also progressing, with 42 percent of the state's oat crop now in the ground.



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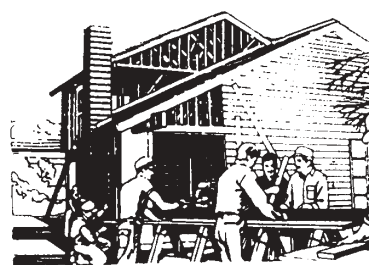
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