Visit of Commissioner Kuneva to the People's Republic of China: frequently asked questions on product safety

EU Consumer Commissioner Meglena Kuneva will visit the People’s Republic of China and Hong Kong on 9-13 June 2008. The principal aim of the visit is to take stock of progress with regard to the commitments made a year ago during her visit in July 2007 to strengthen EU-China product safety controls. The visit will also provide an opportunity to discuss plans for future cooperation, in particular, the revision of the current EU-China Memorandum of Understanding on consumer product safety and the preparation of the first EU-China-US trilateral summit on product safety in Brussels this November.

She will take this opportunity to express condolences to the Chinese for the many victims of the recent earthquake. In Beijing, Commissioner Kuneva will meet Mr Li Changjiang, the Minister responsible for AQSIQ (General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine), and Mr Zhou Bohua, the Minister for Industry and Commerce. The discussion topics include the results of the EU Report "Evaluation of the safety measures in the toy supply chain" (see IP/08/879 and MEMO/08/364) and also the effectiveness of the RAPEX-China alert system for dangerous products including the quarterly reporting. The Commissioner will participate in a Round Table with civil society on EU-China relations in the consumer policy field (with the Chinese Consumer Association, industry representatives, academics, etc.), and deliver a speech at the University for International Business and Economics on “Shared Global Responsibilities”. On her visit to Guangzhou, one of the main toy producing regions, the Commissioner will visit the local quality control and testing center, where she will discuss export controls and obtain an overview of the product safety chain in China. In Hong Kong she will meet local authorities and businesses including the local "Toys Council".

"The EU cannot and will not compromise on safety. 2007 was marked by a summer of recalls, that has led to a winter of evaluation and a spring and summer of change. Trust is the currency of the global market economy. It is the shared interest of both China and the European Union to work in partnership to strengthen consumer confidence and to fully exploit the benefits of the EU-China product safety systems currently in place.

RAPEX and China

According to the 2007 EU RAPEX (Rapid Alert System for non-food consumer products) report, the People’s Republic of China (including Hong Kong) is the country of origin for more than half (52% / 700 notifications) of notified products.
The most frequently notified products in 2007 were:
- toys (417 notifications, approx. 31%),
- motor vehicles (197 notifications, approx. 15%),
- electrical appliances (156 notifications, approx. 12%),
- lighting equipment (84 notifications, approx. 6%),
- cosmetics (81 notifications, approx. 6%).

More than 1 in 3 notified products was either a toy or a childcare article, confirming that child safety is a top-ranking priority for market surveillance authorities.

For more detailed information on the EU RAPEX system, and the 2007 RAPEX Annual Report see:
http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/dyna/rapex/rapex_archives_en.cfm

**Who is responsible for testing products imported in the EU?**

First and foremost, economic operators – namely, manufacturers or their commercial representatives in the EU and European importers. Of course Member State authorities carry out sample testing in their own laboratories, and that is one way for a product to end up on the RAPEX system. Voluntary measures notified by producers on their own initiative account for an increasing share of overall RAPEX notifications.

**Is the product and toy safety situation in China improving?**

The share of notifications on products of Chinese origin submitted through the RAPEX system in 2007 increased by 3 percentage points compared to 2006 (49% in 2006, 52% in 2007). However, it does not necessarily mean that there were a more dangerous Chinese goods on the European market in 2007.

In fact it seems that the knowledge on the origin of products is better since the share of products of unknown origin notified through RAPEX significantly decreased in 2007 compared to previous years (20% in 2005, 17% in 2006 and 13% in 2007). Certain products which had been notified in previous years as being of unknown origin were probably of Chinese origin.

There are positive outcomes emerging from the great efforts being made by the Chinese and EU authorities to improve the safety of Chinese products reaching the EU market. For instance, the Chinese authorities investigated 432 RAPEX notifications since the launch of 'RAPEX-China' application and, where appropriate, took follow-up measures to stop the trade or have the goods improved.

**What is the 'RAPEX-CHINA' application?**

In January 2006, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on general product safety was signed between the Commission’s Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General and the Chinese General Administration for Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ). The MoU establishes a framework for better communication and co-operation between both regulators and specifically seeks to support Chinese authorities in their efforts to ensure product safety, particularly for consumer goods exported to the EU.

One important measure in this context is that RAPEX information on products of Chinese origin is now made available to AQSIQ through the on-line 'RAPEX-China' application. This allows Chinese authorities to follow up directly on notifications regarding unsafe products coming from their territory and identify areas where the safety standards are weaker.
As part of the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding, AQSIQ agreed to provide every 3 months the Commission with information on the follow up actions carried out as a result of RAPEX-China information. The information provided in this report allows the Commission to monitor and analyse the follow-up market surveillance activities carried out by the Chinese authorities on their territory, and allows both parties to identify and address weak points in their co-operation systems.


What is the "Roadmap for safer toys"?

In addition to the general framework provided by the Memorandum of Understanding, a specific Roadmap for safer toys was signed in September 2006. This agreement aims at ensuring that toys exported from China to the EU are safe and outlines a strategy for improving the safety of toys manufactured in China. The Roadmap, supported by both the European and Chinese toy manufacturers' associations, includes practical measures regarding training and technical assistance, exchanges of RAPEX information between the EU and the Chinese authorities, and tracing, feedback and follow-up mechanisms for dangerous products. It also contains a commitment from the Chinese authorities to strengthen inspection and supervision of toys exported to Europe.

What concrete measures is China taking?

In response to last year's wide-scale toy recalls, a large number of the export licensed manufacturers have been audited and forced to improve their safety control systems. 701 companies lost their export license as a result of their poor safety standards. AQSIQ continues this strengthened supervision in 2008.

In November 2007 the Commission agreed on a “list of deliverables” in the field of product safety with AQSIQ, which included, amongst other things:

- Strengthening export safety and quality controls on products from China, in particular for frequently notified products, such as toys, lights, electric plugs and extension cords;
- Promoting awareness of product safety requirements and obligations amongst Chinese operators (manufacturers, exporters, distributors etc).

The Joint Statement, issued at the 10th China-EU Summit in Beijing on 28 November 2007, shows the strong emphasis that the EU put on improving product safety. It also underlines the clear will, on both sides, to continue the existing constructive relations, to commit to a regular exchange of information, and to work towards measurable improvements in product safety in order to allow a prosperous and harmonious trade relationship.

Overall, the Commission feels that there is genuine progress being made in China in the field of product safety and the Commission will seek to ensure that this effort is maintained. The full impact of tighter safety measures and controls should become more apparent with time, so long as product safety is kept as an uncompromised priority in China.

AQSIQ is also making efforts to create a national rapid alert system, interlinked with the RAPEX-China system, so as to allow a quicker and more effective response to dangerous product notifications. Where possible, the Commission is providing technical support to the Chinese authorities in the establishment of this system.
What kind of support is the EU providing to China?

The EU has kept in close contact with the Chinese authorities to provide any support possible when it comes to improving product safety. A high level EU-China meeting (“EU-China High-Level Economic and Trade Mechanism”) took place in Beijing at the end of April where product safety was again a major topic for discussion. The Commission continues to encourage the participation of Chinese experts in traineeship programmes, both in the Commission and in Member States. Education on European product safety rules and their implementation is an effective way of promoting product safety and one that is likely to yield the most long-lasting results.

The EU together with the US will organise further training courses in China in September relating to the safety requirements for textiles, selected electrical products and toys. The EU-China Trade Project carries out a study on the product safety control and tracing mechanisms in place in China. The objective is also to extend the MoU between the Commission and AQSIQ before the end of 2008 and to include ways to further strengthen the cooperation mechanism between both sides, based on the experiences over the last three years. On top of this, in November 2008, the Commission will organise the International Product Safety Week in Brussels with a series of events and seminars for stakeholders and product safety specialists. One of the highlights of this week will be the first EU-US-China trilateral summit on product safety, will be held in Brussels to boost trilateral co-operation in this field.

For further information, please log on to: