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## EU calls for end to death penalty

Stephen Castle in Brussels

PLEDGES OF European help for the interim government in Iraq were overshadowed yesterday when the Baghdad administration rejected calls for it to abolish the death penalty.

Attending his first meeting of EU ministers in Brussels, the Iraqi foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, clashed with his EU counterparts over a request for Iraq to ban capital punishment.

There is concern that, were the Iraqis to execute the former president Saddam Hussein, it would be counterproductive.

Mr Zebari said that, while the end of the death penalty is a long- term aspiration, his country's dire security situation meant that the the deterrent effect of the death penalty remains necessary.

While all EU nations, including France, promised to help reconstruction, the ministers made it clear that, because of the security situation, they are not yet ready to meet Iraqi calls to open a European Commission office in Baghdad.

The future of the death penalty in Iraq is highly sensitive since the EU and the US have starkly different views on capital punishment. Ben Bot, the foreign minister of the Netherlands which holds the EU presidency, made it clear that there had been a clear difference on the issue. The Iraqis had been told that "we will not change our opposition to capital punishment," Mr Bot said.

Though Mr Zebari said he "sympathises" with the European view, he added: "The reality we face on the ground requires some tougher decisions and actions to bring the situation under control."

Mr Bot said the EU is eager to help in reconstruction work, in the process of organising elections, and in the training of police and civil servants.

The EU has committed to spend EUR305m (pounds 203m) in humanitarian and reconstruction aid for Iraq this year.

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