

## **European Voice**

Vol. 12 No. 9 : 9 March 2006

### **Water divides EU member states**

*By David Cronin*

EU governments are divided over whether they should push developing countries to consider a role for private firms in delivering water at an international conference beginning next week.

The World Water Forum in Mexico City (16-22 March) is to issue a declaration addressing the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal of reducing by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water within the next decade.

Sources say that the EU's 25 governments are split on what the outcome of the forum should be. France has been arguing that the declaration should contain a commitment to giving private firms a role in water delivery. But a group of other countries, led by the UK, has questioned whether there should even be a declaration, given that the forum is not an official UN or intergovernmental body; it is organised by the World Water Council, a think-tank dedicated to improving the management of water resources.

Austria's EU presidency is to be represented by Werner Wutscher, the secretary-general of the ministry for agriculture, forestry and water. An Austrian official confirmed that a compromise declaration had been drafted, which contains no reference to water privatisation.

Anti-poverty activists have alleged that Jacques Chirac's government is primarily motivated by the interests of French firm Suez, the world's largest water company. The firm's activities in several Latin American countries have met with lengthy protests. In Bolivia, for example, peasant leader Evo Morales was elected the country's president in January after campaigning against foreign control of water. He has subsequently proposed to expel Suez from Bolivia, where it has faced allegations that it charges €380, three times the average monthly wage of an office clerk, for a household's water connection. Suez recently denied that it was seeking to exploit the country's poor.