

Illegal immigration



Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

Sweden on long-term solution

Matthew Xuereb

Foreign Minister Tonio Borg has said that rather than squabble over whether burden-sharing should be voluntary or mandatory, the fundamental question was whether member states were willing to shoulder part of the load.

Dr Borg's comments were a clear reaction to the statement made by the Swedish Ambassador to Malta, Ulla Gudmundson, earlier this week when she ruled out mandatory burden-sharing under her country's six-month EU presidency.

Ms Gudmundson said her government wanted to embark on a meaningful discussion on how to manage migration issues in the Mediterranean. She repeated this stance yesterday during an event to outline the Swedish presidency's priorities.

She referred to the pilot project agreed upon by EU ministers in June, through which member states take refugees from Malta, and said illegal migration was "a complex issue for Malta, Sweden and Europe".

Dr Borg said France's recent decision to accept 96 refugees last

week and Germany's declaration that it would take 14 refugees put "significant moral pressure" on other member states to follow suit.

Replying to a question from the floor, Ms Gudmundson said Sweden believed a long-term solution to the problem of illegal migration had to be found, especially through continued talks with countries of origin and countries of transit such as Libya and Tunisia.

Dr Borg said that Malta could not rely solely on long-term solutions: "Our problem is immedi-

ate. We would like the European Commission to conclude the framework agreement with Libya by the end of the year. The generous agreement between Italy and Malta led to a lull. How long this lull will last we do not know."

Ms Gudmundson said other key areas the Swedish presidency would be focusing on over the next six months included climate change, the economic crisis and better regulation, cleaning up the Baltic Sea, improving economic prospects in the region and strengthening the EU as a global actor.

She said her country would also carry out the reform of EU institutions, depending on whether the Lisbon Treaty was approved in the Irish referendum.

"With a no vote, we will have to handle an institutional crisis but with a yes vote, we will have to select an EU President," she said.

Ms Gudmundson said her country would like to increase EU member states' drop in emissions by 10 per cent to 30 per cent by 2020. On this, the Swedish presidency would also like to bring on board other key players such as the US, China and India.

Privatisation 'not on the agenda'

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The government has no immediate plans to sell its shares in Bank of Valletta, Finance Minister Tonio Fenech has said.

He said the option remained a possibility in the future as the government believed it should act as regulator rather than an operator in such areas.

Mr Fenech was reacting to a report issued following an International Monetary Fund mission in Malta, in which it was suggested that the government should go ahead with its original plans to privatise the bank.

In October 2004, the government and Banco di Sicilia expressed an intention to sell their shares in Bank of Valletta to a strategic investor. The government has a 25 per cent share while the Sicilian bank has 14 per cent.

Two years later, however, the government decided to halt the privatisation process after the call for expressions of interest failed to attract a proper

strategic investor. The government said it would not dispose of its shares at any cost and that any disposal of the shares would be made in line with a number of criteria and not just on the price.

In its report, the IMF predicted that Malta's deficit would fall under the three per cent mark only in 2013. The EU has given Malta until next year to get its deficit back on track.

Failing to make the EU deadline does not worry Mr Fenech. The government's primary aim, he said, was that of safeguarding jobs and creating the necessary infrastructure and environment to support the creation of new and better jobs.

"The government is aware of the importance of reaching sustainable deficit levels. It has always expressed the importance that sustainable finances play in our economy, particularly in making our country attractive to investment. However, the achievement of this target shall not prejudice the government's top priority of safeguarding jobs," he said.

The IMF report also criticised the way the government was assisting specific companies to deal with the global financial situation and the concession given to companies to pay their taxes later.

Mr Fenech said the government did not agree with the IMF's stand on the issue. He said that not every company that asked for help was granted support.

Through the assistance of a specifically appointed task force, the government reviewed the situations presented by individual companies, identified genuine cases of companies that found themselves in a difficult situation as a result of a fall in orders and ensured that its support was linked with a commitment of investment by the company involved.

As a result, he said, the assistance had resulted in the commitment of around €30 million in new investment and the creation of a number of new jobs. This was over and above the government's social and economic commitment that had seen 2,500 jobs being safeguarded through the assistance provided.

