

***Speech of Colonel Richard Vignon,
President of the French Fire Fighters Federation
CTIF London Conference
26 January 2007***

Dear Mr Deputy,
Dear Mr Presidents,
Dear colleagues,

London is a real symbol for a conference on fire and rescue services when we think of the Great Fire of 1666 which nearly destroyed the city: only the rescuers' efforts and perseverance made it possible to finally extinguish the flames. This is why I would like to thank Dennis DAVIS, chairman of the CTIF English National Committee, for organising this conference in a city so full of history like London and in such a prestigious venue as the House of Commons. I would also like to thank the CTIF for initiating this event which otherwise could not have taken place.

I was asked to give you today the French point of view concerning Europe's position towards fire and rescue. To help you understand the French vision, let me first remind you of the context in which our country has evolved over the past years in terms of civil protection: 2004 marked a turning point in our civil protection system with the adoption of a highly important law that our French Fire Fighters Federation had requested and fought for to get our system modernised. This law gives a new framework to our activities as fire fighters. It aims to involve all citizens in the civil protection culture and includes proposals to improve the fire fighters' status, especially volunteer fire fighters by offering them advantages when they retire from their fire fighting duties. This law has now to be enforced, and this causes much debate in our country, sometimes leading to stormy discussions.

This context makes us feel – like all of you - the interactions that might exist between our system and Europe, be it from a bilateral or a community perspective. There is one thing we must state: we can no longer live apart from each other, and we at the French Fire Fighters Federation think that this must be considered as a new challenge. A challenge that urges us to carry on with and to speed up the pace of opening ourselves to Europe. And to grab these new opportunities, to strengthen our assets and to break our boundaries, we definitely must be united!

This is how our Federation wants to view the relations with its European neighbours: in a dynamic perspective and with much ambition. This is why we decided to set up a team of experts. Three specialists are going to be in charge of developing and maintaining the links between France and all of you. They can be your contacts in France. Firstly Colonel MAURER: he is the former CTIF president and knows the topic well. Secondly Colonel AUTRET: he was a prominent member of the French Fire Fighters Federation as one of its former vice-presidents. He then joined the French Ministry of the Interior where he became one of the authors of the 2004 law I mentioned before. Thirdly, Lieutenant-Colonel MIGNOT, whom you all know as the current CTIF General Secretary. They will work in conjunction with the Administration Board of the French Fire Fighters Federation and with the International Relations Department of the Directorate for Civil Protection at the French Ministry of the Interior to give our association's point of view on developing the French action at international level. I would like to thank here our Ministry for its involvement.

After this brief introduction, let me enter the core of the subject. Europe must not be a black box! We must focus our strategy on understanding Europe better and making Europe understand ourselves better in order to act, and I would like to stress this once more, all together and at all levels: bilateral level, community level but also world level.

To open ourselves to others, we first open ourselves to our closest neighbours. There are naturally more spontaneous exchanges between border countries who also tend to help each other more frequently. Day by day - and even more often now with the ongoing globalisation process, crises might cross a country's border and affect two, three or even more nations. This is why developing cross-border co-operation was essential from the very beginning. As a result we can see that lots of operations are now led in common. Two examples of these common operations were the recent train accident on the Thionville-Luxemburg train route or the fight against forest fires where Italy, Spain, Portugal and France work hand in hand every year.

The French Fire Fighters Federation is willing to use this starting co-operation as a basis for building up a larger project. We currently work on a Twinning Charter to define a framework in which exchanges between French fire fighters and their foreign colleagues could be organised. This Charter also aims to specify how fire fighters could work together in the fields of training, technical aid and operational assistance.

But we cannot only work together in times of crisis. It is important to exchange when everything goes well too. Our purpose is to increase experience exchanges to know how our neighbours deal with civil protection. The only way to improve our practices is to look at what other people do. I would like to insist on this last point by giving you one but clear example: civil protection in France has its strengths, based mainly on the fact that career and volunteer fire fighters complement each other, which is essential to give help and assistance to our fellow citizens anywhere on the French territory and even in the most remote areas. Our strength is also based on the large variety and diversity of our missions which go from fighting against fires to saving people. Yet our system does have its weaknesses too. How to make volunteer fire fighters stay longer in service and how to make it easier for them to leave their work when they have to go on intervention: these two questions hang over us like a sword of Damocles. It is also difficult for us to make others understand why we have two supervision channels – the national government in the operational field and the local authorities in our departments in the administrative and financial fields. Knowing these flaws in our system we must enlarge our viewpoint and look at what other countries do to find some good ideas and improve civil protection in our country. On the other hand, it is our duty too to offer to share our skills, knowledge and experience with our neighbours if they want to.

The French Fire Fighters Federation is very active in the field of experience exchange and also very much involved in developing youth fire brigades since they represent the future of our profession: we encourage -through our financial contribution- young French boys and girls to join in the CTIF International Youth Fire Brigades Competitions that will take place in July this year in Sweden; it is our utmost wish to create new links with other fire fighting associations to enable our children to learn about other countries and other ways of dealing with civil protection, but also to give adult fire fighters the opportunity to get trained to other systems. Exchange programmes like Erasmus or expatriations could be used as a framework to launch that kind of projects. We would also be keen on increasing the number of visits to fire and rescue services on the field as we did yesterday at the London Ambulance Service where we met our British colleagues. We do not have any paramedics in our country, but for

us they could be a real source of inspiration and even serve as a reference for the studies launched by the French authorities to improve the way people can be rescued.

Such exchanges will enlarge and enrich our experiences but also our debates at national level since public opinions and elected representatives always compare their country with others. In France for instance, the question of financing fire and rescue services has become very acute. This is why we want to open ourselves to others to learn how they finance their fire and rescue services so as to give us food for thought. The same goes for people rescue which makes up more than 60% of our interventions, and this figure increases every year. As I told you, we could follow your system of graduated response given by paramedics as a possible mean to improve the way we rescue people. Nowadays the French system is exclusively based on highly specialised doctors whose number is insufficient to meet the needs. France on the other hand could offer to share its experience of volunteer fire fighting and give examples of the measures taken to keep this system well alive and to improve it.

Yet bilateral or multilateral relations are no longer sufficient for us. Today 70% of all statutory and legislative decisions that rule our daily life originate from the European Union. These decisions rule our civil protection as well as our every day life. It is essential for us to take a closer look at the building process of the European Union. Most of the decisions are taken by a qualified majority and in some cases even unanimously - so there is no other way for us than to be united to influence the debate within the European Union, and not let this debate impact on us without a word to say - which unfortunately is what happens now.

Therefore we suggest to monitor very thoroughly statutory evolutions in order to create a database and a network of technical experts on these questions. To do so, the French Fire Fighters Federation will strengthen its involvement in CTIF commissions, especially in the Europe commission, and will propose new fields of investigation. At the last CTIF General Assembly for instance we proposed to set up a commission dedicated to volunteer fire fighters. Again we would like to submit this proposal to you today.

The reflection we lead within our associations to represent fire fighters' rights and interests is essential, but it should not prevent us from intervening directly in the European Union decision process to make sure the specificities of our activities are taken into account. Nowadays the European institutions decide upon many topics related to our activities without systematically consulting us: our working time, the standardisation of our equipment and materials, emergency calls and the 112 emergency number, and, more recently, free access to public employment for all European Union residents. Considering this, the French Fire Fighters Federation has decided to set up an immediate reaction force to convey our position to all European institutions: the Commission, the Parliament and the Council. In this field as in many others, and even more than in other fields, there is no other way than to be united to act efficiently. The only way to get a qualified majority is to stand together to convince our national representations in Brussels and the European institutions.

We might more or less consider this approach as « defensive », yet we must prove ourselves constructive and come up with lots of proposals, keeping in mind that we walk towards a common civil protection policy. As you all know, a community action programme in favour of civil protection was already launched in 1985. The two thousand and five / two thousand and six budget amounts to four point eight million euros. This remains insufficient, far insufficient! We can no longer be satisfied with a European civil protection that is still at

the embryo stage. Civil protection has to keep its intergovernmental specificity, yet this issue deserves a better place in European priorities, and above all a place adapted to field realities.

This is why our Federation strongly supports the proposals contained in the report published by Michel Barnier: we say “yes” to a European civil protection force, “yes” to the setting-up of a Civil Security Council, “yes” to the greater role to be played by the General Affairs and External Relations Council. French fire fighters also strongly support the creation in France of a European Training Institute for Civil Protection as well as the proposal made by the French Ministry of the Interior to create a flying European hospital squad in which fire fighters would have their role to play thanks to the medical personnel in their ranks. So let us build this policy together!

Relations at a transboundary, bilateral or European level: we have to go one step further. Our vision must go beyond Europe. Through Europe we can already consider the next step: building up a worldwide civil protection project. There have always been disasters throughout the world but something has changed: now rescue forces come from any country in the world to help save victims. To give fire fighters the place they deserve in the field of international aid, we must make ourselves heard in any nation and any world organisation.

Europe must speak up in one voice if it wants to make itself heard. We fire fighters must be essential compounds of international aid because we have huge human, material and financial resources, but also because we share the same strong values. The example of the tsunami showed Europe’s capacity to react but it also revealed in a striking way its weaknesses, the lack of co-ordination, the absence of autonomous flying transportation means. In January 2005, the French Fire Fighters Federation adopted a motion to support the French initiative in favour of a Rapid European Response Force made up of both civil and military forces. Our vice-president, Médecin-Colonel BASSETTI, wrote a report to ring the alarm bell. European opinions are divided on this issue, among those who ask for more integration and those who want to be more cautious. It is our task to find the right compromise. If we stay without doing anything, others will act, yet without us. I invite all those who wish to do so to join us to organise ourselves and support this initiative.

Only united will we be able to build the civil protection of tomorrow – first of all at European level and then worldwide – based on our values of generosity, solidarity, self-sacrifice, and where fire fighters will have their role to play. To achieve this, we must work together and build a common model taking into account our different experiences.

Let us lay the foundation stone of this great project. The French CTIF National Committee set up a commission dedicated to Europe. In this framework, let me invite you next summer to Paris for a conference on the question of financing fire and rescue services so that we can go deeper into our dialogue. This will be a great opportunity to compare our different means of financing fire and rescue services and to find out how we could improve our civil protection systems in this respect. I hope that many of you will attend this meeting, since the civil protection of tomorrow relies upon our union!