

STATEMENT BY SIR CHRISTOPHER SOAMES IN THE EMERGENCY DEBATE ON
PORTUGAL

Strasbourg, Wednesday, 18 June 1975

I have listened with interest and with concern to what the Honourable Member had to say about the development of the situation in Portugal and his recent visit there. I think it is of great use both to the Commission and to the House to have the opportunity to hold this debate. As I have had the occasion to tell the House before, the Commission attaches very great importance to the course of events in Portugal and believes firmly that it is in the interest of the Community to do everything within its power to help Portugal along the road to a pluralist democracy.

To give effect to this view the Commission last week sent forward a comprehensive set of proposals for the extension and expansion of Portugal's existing agreement with the Community. The Commission's proposals cover agricultural and industrial trade, industrial, technological and financial cooperation, and the treatment of Portugal's migrant workers in the Community.

But in the Commission's view, by far the most important part of these proposals is for an immediate and substantial financial effort by the Community and its Member States on behalf of Portugal. This effort would anticipate the conclusion of the negotiations and the necessary ratification of a formal financial protocol. It is intended to help secure the economic and social foundations for a pluralist democracy in Portugal. The impact and success of this special financial aid will of course depend to a very great extent on the speed with which it can be implemented; it is our hope and our belief that if our proposals can be translated into rapid action they will be of real assistance to Portugal.

This major proposal for immediate financial aid to Portugal derives from our view that the continuing deterioration of the economic situation in Portugal is in itself more and more jeopardising the evolution of the political events in that country. There is no doubt that when the Caetano regime was overthrown in April 1974, Portugal was immediately confronted with a series of daunting economic challenges and had to face these at a time when world economic conditions, in particular runaway international inflation followed by a deepening recession, made this all the more difficult. Without attaching responsibility to any one factor, be it political or economic, it must be clear to all observers that this situation has been getting steadily worse and now bears all the marks of a vicious circle linking lower investment, rising unemployment, a widening balance-of-payments deficit, and almost complete stagnation of the economy. This aid we have proposed the community will give, will hopefully help, the Portuguese Government to reverse these dangerous trends, although it must be clear that, as in many other countries in the world, no amount of external aid can replace the need for successful domestic economic policies.

Of course Portugal's internal affairs are entirely a matter for themselves. But these proposals represent the practical expression of the Commission's view that the Community should help Portugal to progress towards a pluralist democracy and we believe very firmly that it is in that context that they must be considered and put into effect.

I have now said enough as the first contribution to this debate. I will try to reply to any specific points that Honourable Members raise in the debate at the end. As I have said before in this House, I believe we all of us have a duty, while expressing our very great sympathy for the Portuguese people and our hopes for their progress to democracy, to say nothing in this public forum which will directly or indirectly make that progress more difficult. We all, I am sure, wish Portugal well.