

UNECE TIR Contact Group discussed application of amendments to TIR Convention.

The TIR Contact Group of the UNECE held its seventh session on 22 and 23 April 2002 in Athens. The objective of this meeting, hosted by the Greek Ministry of Economy and Finance, was to ensure proper application at the national and international levels of a package of amendments to the TIR Convention that will come into force on 12 May 2002 in all 63 Contracting States to the Convention. The meeting was attended by more than 120 participants from 34 countries representing national Customs authorities as well as the transport and trade industry.

The session of the TIR Contact Group was opened by Mr. Apostolos FOTIADIS, Vice-Minister of Economy and Finance of the Hellenic Republic and addressed by Mr. Vassilis MANOLOPOULOS, Director-General of Customs and Excise. They stressed the importance of the TIR Convention for efficient international transport and trade in Europe and encouraged its Contracting Parties to undertake all measures to ensure effective application of all provisions and facilities provided by this only pan-European Customs transit system.

The Chairman of the session, Mr. Panayiotis FRAGOS, Director, Department of Customs and Excise of the Ministry of Economy and Finance of the Hellenic Republic stressed that the facilities provided by the TIR Convention for international transport and trade could only be fully exploited if the competent Customs authorities and the transport industry worked together, shared its responsibilities and fully assumed their roles foreseen in the Convention. This was particularly important for the functioning of the international TIR guarantee system administered by the IRU.

The amendments to the TIR Convention that will come into force on 12 May 2002 under Phase II of the TIR revision process, are part of a long-term revision of the TIR Customs transit system started in 1995 by the UNECE. The objective of this process is to bring the TIR Customs transit procedure, dating back to 1975, in line with modern Customs and trade procedures and to ensure its future stability on a global level.

The latest amendments prescribe and define in detail the roles as well as the legal and administrative responsibilities of Customs authorities, national TIR Carnet issuing and guaranteeing associations, transport operators and the international TIR guaranteeing system which is at present managed by the International Road Transport Union (IRU). These new legal prescriptions mainly relate to internal Customs procedures and will not directly affect external Customs controls visible to transporters and traders. They will however, it is hoped, increase considerably the efficiency of all required legal and administrative procedures and will thus enhance the advantages derived from the TIR system by national Customs authorities and international transport and trade.

The IRU, a non-governmental organization (NGO) representing the interests of the road transport industry, has already been authorized by the States members of the Convention to centrally print and distribute TIR Carnets. Under the new provisions of

the TIR Convention, the IRU will now also need to be authorized to take on responsibility for the effective organization and functioning of the international TIR guarantee system. Given its know-how and experience in the administration of the TIR Carnet system during the past five decades, it may be expected that the IRU will continue to administer the international TIR guarantee chain following entry into force of the latest amendments to the TIR Convention.

Phase I of the TIR revision process entered already into force in early 1999 and has introduced controlled access to the TIR system, transparency in the functioning of the international TIR guarantee system and has created a new intergovernmental control authority: the TIR Executive Board (TIRExB). Phase III of the TIR revision process has already been initiated by the UNECE. It will focus on computerization of the TIR Customs procedure (e-TIR) and should ensure that this United Nations treaty can be applied in the future on a global level without jeopardizing its efficient functioning in Europe.

In line with its mandate to supervise the application of the TIR Convention, the UNECE and the TIR Executive Board (TIRExB), incl. the TIR secretariat, representing all Contracting Parties to the TIR Convention, will continue to safeguard the functioning of the TIR system. They will also ensure that all parties to the TIR Convention fully apply all of its provisions.

Mr. M. Magold, TIR Secretary and Chief of the Border Crossing Facilitation Section in the UNECE Transport Division pointed out that

" ... the TIR procedure can only function efficiently in its more than 50 member countries having very different economic, legal and administrative environments, if the carefully negotiated balance of the roles and responsibilities entrusted to each of the parties in the TIR system is safeguarded. Only then will the TIR Customs transit procedure guarantee efficient international transport and trade as well as non-bureaucratic settlement of suspended duties and taxes in case of misuse of the procedure.

Transport operators and Customs authorities alike have to be aware that organized crime will permanently try, as in the past, to misuse the facilities provided by the TIR Convention. By securing the TIR Customs transit system, as it is done at present by the international community, organized crime will not go away. It will rather tend to target other "weak" links in international transport and trade chains, such as import or export procedures or use other techniques, such as false or double Customs declarations/ invoices. Also increasingly sophisticated smuggling techniques, particularly for highly taxed cargoes, such as alcohol and cigarettes are used. Transport operators and Customs authorities alike have to continue to be on guard against such illegal endeavours".