

**MALTA AND TUNISIA AGREE ON JOINT OIL EXPLORATION AND EXPLOITATION****FRENDO AND ABDALLAH SIGN AGREEMENT IN TUNIS**

Malta's Foreign Minister Dr. Michael Frendo and the Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs H.E. Abdelwaheb Abdallah have today signed an agreement in Tunis for joint oil exploitation and exploration in zones of the Continental Shelf located between the two States.

Malta and Tunisia have agreed to determine the exact coverage of these zones, by setting up a joint expert group within the next 2 weeks, with a deadline to present their conclusions to the two Ministers of Foreign Affairs Frendo and Abdallah within three months.

The Agreement reached between the two countries, following Minister Frendo's 80-minute meeting with President Ben Ali and with Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdallah, also lays out that the experts shall determine the coverage of these zones taking duly into account any possible rights of third States and following the relevant rules of international law.

The agreement was clinched this morning, following intense negotiations over the past 48 hours, which led Minister Frendo to extend his stay in Tunisia by another day and forfeit participation in the EU Foreign Ministers' Council in Brussels.

Minister Michael Frendo described the agreement as "a major breakthrough in an issue that has been unresolved for the last 35 years". He further stated that he was confident that, "taken forward, it will open up tremendous opportunities for oil exploration and exploitation between Malta and Tunisia".

Minister Frendo expressed his special thanks to the President of the Republic of Tunisia H.E. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali for his personal commitment and friendship. President Ben Ali received Foreign Minister Frendo at the Presidential Palace in Carthage last Friday.

"This agreement, dealing with such sensitive issues as oil exploration and exploitation in the continental shelf, is yet another example of the depth and closeness of the relations and friendship between Malta and Tunisia. We are both sincerely committed to developing fully a multi-level relationship between our countries and our two peoples. I look forward to working to develop to its utmost our multilevel relationship" added Minister Frendo.

Throughout the official visit and negotiations, Minister Michael Frendo was assisted by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ms. Cecilia Attard Pirotta, Malta's Ambassador in Tunisia Dr. Tanya Vella, Mr. Chris Scicluna and Mr. Mark Vassallo from the Minister's Private Secretariat and Mr. Simon Pullicino from the Malta Embassy in Tunis.

The Official Press Communique agreed between the parties reads as follows:

"In the framework of the friendly, good neighbourly relations between Tunisia and Malta and in parallel with the 6th Session of the Malta Tunisia Mixed Commission held in Tunis on 23 and 24 February 2006, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malta Dr. Michael Frendo and his Tunisian counterpart Mr. Abdelwaheb Abdallah, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tunisia, proceeded in Tunis on Monday 27th February 2006 to the signature of a common agreement relating to the setting up of a joint group of experts, mandated to determine the continental shelf zones located between the two States, which shall be the subject of common exploration and exploitation.

The signing of this agreement constitutes an important step in the strengthening of the excellent relations which bind the two countries and which reflects the willingness expressed by the two Heads of State of the two countries H.E. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and H.E. Dr. Edward Fenech Adami, to establish a strategic partnership between the two countries".