

Dutch to decide on Bulgaria, Romania Schengen bids by 2012

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(LUXEMBOURG) - The Netherlands will decide on Bulgaria and Romania's requests to join the European Union's visa-free Schengen network next year, Immigration Minister Gerd Leers said on Thursday.

Members of the European Parliament on Wednesday voted in support of their accession to the border-free zone which they hoped to conclude this year.

The two countries have however faced strong opposition from France, Germany and other members who want them to up their efforts in tackling crime and corruption.

Leers said Dutch ministers would rule on the matter next year after examining a number of reports.

"It is imperative that all adopted judicial reform measures in Romania and Bulgaria are effective and irreversible," he said.

"The Schengen system is based on mutual trust since we are asking new countries to effectively guard our collective borders.

"We will therefore carefully study the cooperation and verification mechanism reports on this matter, the next of which is expected soon."

A Dutch government source said that the next report was expected to be finalised in 2012.

Leers, speaking ahead of a meeting to discuss migration issues across the European Union, said: "In any event, it is too early to take a decision now and it may take some time before we are in position to do so."

The agreement of all 26 Schengen members is required before the accession of a new country.

Britain, Ireland and Cyprus remain outside the Schengen area which counts non-EU nations such as Switzerland and Norway among its members however.

The agreement allows people to travel between countries without the need to show their passport at border crossings.

The European Commission is scheduled to publish its next monitoring report on justice reforms and corruption in the two Balkan countries this summer.

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