Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the Middle East

Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, made today the following statement:

"I have met Senator Mitchell who has just returned from his mission to the Middle East to discuss the latest developments in the peace process.

On the occasion of our meeting we recall that the European Union and the United States are firmly committed to working in concert to make progress towards Israeli-Palestinian peace and the establishment of a contiguous, viable and sovereign state of Palestine alongside a secure state of Israel. We believe that urgent progress is needed towards a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that ends the occupation that began in 1967. We recognize that our common goals for peace and security in the Middle East should be achieved through negotiations and with the support of the international community. The US and the EU have recommended immediate engagement by the parties with the US on the core issues of the conflict, the US as outlined by the Secretary in her speech on December 10, 2010 and the EU in its Council Conclusions on December 13, 2010. We urge the parties to make progress on this approach.

In those discussions, the parties must take into consideration Israel’s legitimate security concerns and the Palestinian’s legitimate national aspirations. The US and the EU reiterate their call for the immediate and unconditional release of Gilad Shalit.

The EU and the US stress the importance of intensified coordination within the Quartet, as well as of close cooperation with Arab partners, building on the Arab Peace Initiative.
The EU and the US commend the work of the Palestinian Authority in building the institutions of the future State of Palestine. We reaffirm our commitment to continue to work in partnership, along with our allies around the globe, to support the work of the PA to build the institutions of its future state.

We expressed our continued concern about the situation in Gaza.

I reiterated to Senator Mitchell EU policy calling for the immediate, sustained and unconditional opening of crossings to allow the flow of humanitarian aid, exports and people. We appreciate the Government of Israel’s recent decision to ease the closure. We encourage a swift implementation and further efforts and complimentary measures in order to achieve a fundamental change of policy that allows for the reconstruction and economic recovery of Gaza. The EU is ready to continue providing institution building support to the PA to increase capacity at the crossings. Increased and accelerated imports of construction materials are another crucial component of Gaza's recovery, for the priorities identified by the PA and the international community, including water infrastructure, schools, and health facilities."