Catherine Ashton at the first inter-institutional meeting of the UfM

The first inter-institutional meeting of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), gathering the heads of the respective institutions, took place in the European Parliament on Monday, 12 November, in Brussels. Called by Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament and President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the UfM (PA-UfM), the PA-UfM Bureau meeting aimed at mobilising political support for key UfM projects as well as at giving a major impetus to UfM work in the Southern neighbourhood region. High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton and Foreign Minister of Jordan Nasser Judeh represented the co-Presidency of the UfM at the meeting.

"I congratulate President Schulz for bringing us together for this important occasion – the first high-level inter-institutional gathering of the UfM. It was a very useful occasion where we had the opportunity to discuss how we go forward. We now have the opportunity to work closer together and to bring impetus to UfM activities: focusing on tangible real projects, to be able to address not just long-term but also short and medium term challenges of the people of the Mediterranean. I'm looking forward to seeing cooperation at Ministerial level and preparing the meetings, foreseen in 2013, on transport energy and empowerment of women," said Catherine Ashton following the meeting.

With the EU having taken over the UfM Northern Co-Presidency and Jordan as Southern Co-President, UfM Partners now have the opportunity to work closely together and bring new impetus and coherence to UfM activities. Building on the achievements of the Euromed/Barcelona process, efforts concentrate on tangible projects and further cooperation at inter-governmental level. Participants discussed important examples of good UfM projects such as: the Gaza desalination plant, the Trans Maghreb Highway project, the efforts to promote employability of young women in the region and the Euromed University in Fez.
Also participating at the meeting were European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle, Vice-President of the European Investment Bank Philippe de Fontaine Vive, President of the Anna Lindh Foundation André Azoulay and Faltallah Sijilmassi, Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean. All participants agreed that parliamentary support to UfM projects is essential and welcomed the development of institutional links between the UfM Parliamentary Assembly and the UfM Secretariat, in Barcelona.

**Background**

The Union for the Mediterranean promotes economic integration and democratic reform across 16 neighbours to the EU’s south in North Africa and the Middle East. Formerly known as the Barcelona Process, cooperation agreements were re-launched in 2008 as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The re-launch was an opportunity to render relations both more concrete and more visible with the initiation of new regional and sub-regional projects with real relevance for those living in the region. Projects address areas such as economy, environment, energy, health, migration and culture.

Along with the 27 EU member states, 16 Southern Mediterranean, African and Middle Eastern countries are members of the UfM: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. As of September 2010, the UfM also has a functional secretariat, based in Barcelona, a Secretary General and six deputy secretary generals.

Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU in March 2012 took over the UfM Northern co-Presidency, while Jordan assumed the Southern co-Presidency in July 2012.

The UfM has a number of key initiatives on its agenda:

- the de-pollution of the Mediterranean Sea, including coastal and protected marine areas;
- the establishment of maritime and land highways that connect ports and improve rail connections so as to facilitate movement of people and goods;
- a joint civil protection programme on prevention, preparation and response to natural and man-made disasters;
- a Mediterranean solar energy plan that explores opportunities for developing alternative energy sources in the region;
- a Euro-Mediterranean University, inaugurated in Slovenia in June 2008;
- the Mediterranean Business Development Initiative, which supports small businesses operating in the region by first assessing their needs and then providing technical assistance and access to finance.