Strasbourg, 21 November 2012

Statement on Gaza on behalf of High Representative Catherine Ashton

21 November 2012, European Parliament, Strasbourg

Honourable Members,

We are now in the 8th day of the current conflict in Gaza and Israel. I am sure you followed developments last night as closely as I and with the same hope that a ceasefire would be attained. Regrettably our hopes proved to be premature. While I understand there were indeed intensive negotiations on a possible ceasefire to come into effect at midnight last night local time, the announcement of such a truce was postponed. Negotiations have continued today – it is vital that they succeed.

The UN Security Council met last night to discuss developments and will resume discussions later today in New York if needed.

Throughout the day I have also been receiving reports of a terrorist attack on a bus in Tel Aviv. This is totally unacceptable. I wish a speedy recovery to those injured. The European Union reiterates its strong and unequivocal condemnation of all forms and acts of terrorism, independently of origin, cause or motive and its unwavering commitment to the fight against terrorism. The situation on the ground is very volatile and attacks continue both in Israel and Gaza. We reiterate our call for an urgent de-escalation and cessation of hostilities. The diplomatic focus is now on a ceasefire as a stepping stone to a longer lasting solution. In order to achieve this, the HR/VP is in continuous close contact with key players in the region and elsewhere. She has been reaching out during the last days in particular to Egypt, the US, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the UN and the Arab League. She co-chaired the EU/League of Arab States Ministerial meeting in Cairo where she was able to speak to key players including Egyptian President Morsi and Arab League Secretary General Al-Araby. She has remained in constant touch throughout.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS:

Michael Mann +32 498 999 780 - +32 2 299 97 80 - Michael.Mann@eeas.europa.eu
Maja Kocijancic +32 498 984 425 - +32 2 298 65 70 - Maja.Kocijancic@ec.europa.eu
Sebastien Brabant +32 498 986 433 - Sebastien.Brabant@ec.europa.eu
COMM-SPP-HRVP-ASHTON@ec.europa.eu
www.eeas.europa.eu

EN
As you will have seen, on Monday 19 November the FAC agreed conclusions on the violence in Gaza and Israel and on efforts aimed at achieving a cease fire.

The EU calls for a cease-fire and an immediate de-escalation, given the continuing violence over the last days and mounting civilian losses. The EU has also strongly condemned the rocket attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip which Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza must cease immediately. We have also stressed the need for all sides to fully respect international humanitarian law. Protection of civilians at all times should be strictly ensured. By recalling the EU's overall position on the Gaza blockade, this text represents a balanced consensus but also reflects clear and strong EU positions on the current situation and demonstrates a unity of purpose in the present crisis.

The situation in Gaza has placed Egypt at the heart of international efforts to bring about a solution to the crisis. The EU has stated on Monday its support to the efforts of Egypt and other actors for a rapid ceasefire. It also welcomed the mission of the UNSG to the region and supported him in his mission of peace. The EU now stands ready to do what it can to encourage all sides to ensure the implementation of a (future) ceasefire.

Honourable Members,

A cease fire is in the interest of both sides, not least the civilian population which has already taken a heavy toll over the past few days, enduring both physical and psychological trauma. The loss of civilian lives on both sides has been tragic.

The humanitarian situation, already precarious in Gaza, has inevitably taken a turn for the worse but humanitarian support is still available. The vital goods border crossing at Kerem Shalom remained open throughout the hostilities. For the time being food is not in short supply. The World Food Programme continues with its food distribution activities. Gaza’s limited power supply has not been seriously affected but clean water and drugs are in short supply.

The EU will continue to play a leading role on the humanitarian front and already dedicates a considerable proportion of its Palestinian assistance programme to the Gaza Strip. This includes not only our support to UNRWA - the majority of the Gaza population are Palestine refugees - but also direct financial assistance to support vulnerable Palestinian families. The EU is also providing support to sustain vital social services including in the health sector and is engaged in upgrading the Palestinian side of the key Gaza-Israel crossing at Kerem Shalom, through which so much of the vital support on which Gaza depends must pass.

The EU stands ready to reactivate the EUBAM Rafah Mission, once political and security conditions allow, to ensure the EU third party role at the Rafah crossing point, as set out in the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access.

Fully recognising Israel's legitimate security needs the EU continues to call for a complete stop to all arms smuggling into Gaza. At the same time the EU continues to call for the immediate, sustained and unconditional opening of crossings for the flow of humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons to and from the Gaza Strip. Gaza’s position remains unsustainable for as long as it continues to be politically separated from the West Bank.
The EU recalls its readiness to assist in the reconstruction and economic recovery of Gaza in close partnership with the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government, in line with UNSC Resolution 1860.

Honourable Members,

The recent upsurge of violence in Gaza and Israel against the background of a seismic shift in the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa, shows how fragile the region continues to be.

Moving towards the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would help the stabilisation of the entire region and reward those who are committed to non-violence. The EU has a strong interest in fulfilling Palestinian aspirations for statehood and Israel’s for security, including against regional threats.

A ceasefire, if properly implemented, would help but would not be sufficient. The need to find a sustainable solution for Gaza is more urgent than ever – a long-term solution which will not lead to yet another round of violence.

To this end, and as soon as practicable, the EU will intensify its contacts with its partners within the Quartet and with other key players to explore all possibilities to create a new dynamic in the Peace Process.

By holding a debate on developments in Gaza the European Parliament has shown yet again its overriding concern for the civilian population in the region and its constant support for lasting peace in the Middle East.

With 130 people killed in Gaza and 5 in Israel by last night, many of whom are innocent women and children, and more deaths in Gaza today, we owe it to the ordinary people caught up in this conflict to make every effort to achieve an immediate ceasefire and a durable solution which addresses Gaza’s isolation. Journalists have also been among the casualties, and I repeat my call on Israel to ensure the protection of civilians at all times. I also deplore the summary executions of seven Palestinians in the Gaza Strip over the past two days by armed groups there. These represent the grossest violation of human rights.

Intra-Palestinian reconciliation is a key element for any durable solution. It is important to bear in mind that the situation in Gaza has also led to an increase in tensions in the West Bank, with two deaths confirmed after the use of live Israeli ammunition in the West Bank protests on 18 and 19 November. Palestinian unity is an important element for a viable Palestinian state and essential for securing a lasting peace with Israel.

The EU has consistently called for Palestinian reconciliation under the authority of President Abbas and has commended Egypt’s earlier efforts to bring this about since the signing of a reconciliation agreement in May 2011.

A negotiated two state settlement, which we have always called for, continues to be the only viable option open to both Israel and the Palestinian people. Escalations of violence of the type we have witnessed these last few days are a tragic distraction from this hard nosed reality.