

The European Union Nobel Peace Prize: a legacy to be shared
By John Gatt-Rutter, EU Representative – (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA)

The news of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize being awarded to the European Union came as a surprise to many. The Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision is a clear reflection of what the EU has achieved internally. Today four young European children are attending the award-winning ceremony in Oslo; a symbolic representation of the 500 million citizens of our Union to whom the prize goes to. It is an opportunity to reflect on a reality that the generation of these children take as a matter of course: living in peace and security.

The European Union is a group of nations and a group of diverse people; initially not always well-disposed towards each other. Over our 60 years history we have managed to create a historic example of cooperation based on a serious attempt to **reconcile**, defend **human rights** and **spread the values of peace and democracy** across the continent.

The Union was created in the aftermath of a devastating war. The first steps were to foster economic cooperation: the idea being that countries who trade with one another become economically interdependent and so more likely to avoid conflict. Over a seventy-year period Germany had fought three wars with the 'arch-enemy' France. Today a war between Germany and France is simply unthinkable. The solid Franco-German reconciliation lies at the heart of the EU's peace project.

The ceremony falls on the International and European Human Rights Day. Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights: these are all values at the centre of our policies. These are values which have contributed to prosperity and improved living conditions in our continent. These are values that even at times of crisis - like the current acute financial crisis - are maintained. And I think our approach to human and civil rights is something that people in this part of the world respect Europe for.

The basic EU principle that *'together we can achieve more'* remains an incentive for European countries to join the Union. With successive enlargements, we continue to spread peace and democracy across the continent. We continue to see nations prepared to share some of their sovereignty for a better common future. The enlargement agenda is now focused on EU neighbours in the Balkans, following the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 90s. Croatia is set to join in July 2013 and accession negotiations started with Montenegro in 2012. EU's visionary project continues to grow and evolve. This is tribute to our founding principles of promoting peace and preventing conflict and the appeal that they still exert. This is also testament to the fact that any project of reconciliation and integration is an ever-evolving one.

Despite the challenges - and there have been many to date - the path that Europe has taken is one that any other continent would aspire to take. **There is a legacy to be shared with the rest of the world** and the Nobel Peace Prize is a reminder of that.

The EU of today is a major global player. This prize comes with a great sense of responsibility to deliver on this legacy, not just within our borders but across the world.

What we have come to call the Middle East Peace Process has resulted in several Nobel Peace Prizes already... This may seem even more paradoxical today, only a few weeks after yet another devastating escalation of violence which resulted in the death and suffering of so many innocent people.

Despite having many reasons to doubt, there are also reasons to hope. The current ceasefire in Gaza – albeit fragile – is one that we need to consolidate and transform into something more durable. If not, it will not be too long before another escalation. There are not enough ways to stress that violence is not the answer. Only a political solution will end this conflict.

The EU has been accused times and again for not being assertive enough in bringing about this political solution. But we should remember the EU is a soft power leading by example working to create consensus. Building consensus requires patience and time. This is how we have been advancing in-house and what we are doing in our foreign policy. The EU is composed of Member States who each have their history, their traditions, their links and their interests. But in the case of the Middle East we have our common, principled positions which unite us and guide our work here. We were the first to talk about the Palestinian right to self-determination and the first to translate this into a two-state solution. Today this is the generally accepted solution of the international community to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our principle foreign policy objective is to see an end to this conflict. And now more than ever our commitment focuses on preserving the viability of the two-state solution.

I want to end with the opening of the 1950 Schuman Declaration: "*World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it*". The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the EU as a symbol of a long-run effort to put aside our bloody history and promote peace and democracy through closer integration. It is these principles that will guide the creation of an independent, viable, contiguous and democratic Palestinian state which will be the only guarantee for a peaceful future in this region.