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Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner to visit Israel and the Palestinian Territories 19/20 June

Reference: IP/06/792 Date: 16/06/2006

HTML: EN
PDF: EN
DOC: EN

IP/06/792

Brussels, 16 June 2006

Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner to visit Israel and the Palestinian Territories 19/20 June

The Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner will visit Israel and the Palestinian Territories on 19/20 June 2006. During her trip she intends to meet Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, as well as Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and other leading figures on both sides. She will not meet any member of the Hamas-led government. At the request of the Quartet (EU, US, UN and Russia) Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner has spearheaded efforts to develop proposals for a Temporary International Mechanism to facilitate the direct delivery of assistance to the Palestinian people to meet basic needs, without the money passing to or through the PA government. Now that these proposals have won the approval of the Member States of the EU, she looks forward to discussing the new Mechanism with all parties. During her visit talks will also focus on the current political situation and prospects for a return to dialogue leading to a negotiated two-state solution.

On the eve of her visit the Commissioner said: "This is a delicate moment for all parties. There can be no progress on any front without dialogue: between Israel and the Palestinian President; and between the Palestinians themselves. That is why we urge early contact between PM Olmert and President Abbas. It is also why we urge the new Palestinian government to unlock the door to a peaceful future by renouncing violence, recognising Israel and accepting previous obligations and agreements, including the Roadmap".

She added : " We Europeans are determined to play our part in preventing a humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian Territories. But there can be no business as usual with a government that has not yet accepted the fundamental principles of peace. It is for this reason that we have worked hard to develop a Mechanism that will meet some basic needs without money passing through the government".

The Mechanism is open to all donors, and could be used by Israel to channel withheld Palestinian tax revenues.

The Mechanism will cover essential supplies to the health sector and payments to health care service providers utilities including fuel and basic needs allowances to meet the essential needs of the poorest segments of the population.

President Abbas' office will act as interface for the donor community in the operation of the Mechanism, signing and authorising all necessary documents.

Assistance will be channelled through a three part structure:

1. The Emergency Services Support Programme (ESSP) of the World Bank will be expanded to cover essential supplies in the health sector and basic allowances to those who are providing care in hospitals and clinics. While implementation procedures are being developed, the European Commission will co ordinate with the World Bank in providing immediately and directly allowances to the health care sector employees from the community budget.
2. The Interim Emergency Relief Contribution (IERC) of the European Commission will be reinforced to ensure uninterrupted supply of essential utilities such as fuel.
3. A Needs Based Allowance Programme will be developed as quickly as possible to create a "social safety net". A fund will be established to make payments direct to individual bank accounts on the basis of need.

Parts one and two of the Mechanism will be launched immediately, with the aim of launching payments to individuals by early July. The aim is to have part three of the Mechanism functioning as soon as possible. All three will operate with strict controls in full accountability and transparency.

Since the Hamas-led PA government came to power, the European Union has suspended direct aid to or through the Palestinian Authority. It has, however, expanded its assistance to help meet Palestinian basic needs. €154 million has been made available since the beginning of 2006, which includes €64 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, €40 million to ensure uninterrupted power supply; and €34 million humanitarian aid. Despite the suspension of direct aid announced earlier in the year, the EU remains the biggest donor to the Palestinians.

The EU recently held a very successful Association Council meeting with Israel in Luxembourg. As well as political issues, the meeting focussed on the early successes of the EU-Israel Joint Action Plan under the Neighbourhood Policy which is playing an important part in deepening the bilateral relationship