

## **Ceasefire in Gaza welcomed by EU and Israel**

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Foreign Ministers of the EU and Israel have welcomed the two-day old ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, considering it a positive development in the Middle East peace process.

"However, a ceasefire is always fragile without a political process", warned Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja at a press conference following the EU-Israel troika meeting on Monday, 27 November, which took place in Tampere in the margins of the Eighth Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Foreign Ministers, part of the Barcelona Process of cooperation between the EU and its Mediterranean partner countries. The troika had a meeting with Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. Taking part on the EU side, as well as Foreign Minister Tuomioja, were the EU's External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

"I was happy to see that we have come so much closer in our views", said Tuomioja, referring to the agenda of the EU-Israel meeting, which included the Middle East peace process, Iran's nuclear aspirations, EU-Israel relations and the Barcelona Process.

Foreign Minister Livni shared the EU's optimism and said that she hoped that the ceasefire could be extended to the West Bank. A ceasefire is only the first step, she said, and the international community should push for it to be followed by a renouncement of violence and terrorism, which would be particularly important in order to send a message of support to moderate Palestinians.

Livni referred to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's statement earlier on Monday in which he offered to release numerous Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the release of an Israeli soldier seized in Gaza in the summer. In a major policy speech, Olmert also offered a series of humanitarian and economic incentives if violence against Israel ceased.

"A Palestinian state is in our interests", said Livni, saying that the goal was two states living side by side in peace.

Livni praised recent improvements in relations between the EU and Israel, saying that this was largely due to Israel becoming more open towards Europe.

Should the ceasefire hold, the whole atmosphere in the Middle East would change, said EU High Representative Javier Solana. At this point, he said, the EU is waiting for the Palestinians to finalise the establishment of a new government, for Israel to alleviate the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the West Bank and to address the important issue of settlements, and to see how the political expectations of the Palestinians are met.