

COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION



5701/09 (Presse 18)

PRESS RELEASE

2921st Council meeting

General Affairs and External Relations

External Relations

Brussels, 26 January 2009

President Karel SCHWARZENBERG

Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

* Some external relations items were adopted without debate at the 2920th meeting on General Affairs (5485/09).

PRESS

Rue de la Loi 175 B - 1048 BRUSSELS Tel.: +32 (0)2 281 9548 / 6319 Fax: +32 (0)2 281 8026 press.office@consilium.europa.eu http://www.consilium.europa.eu/Newsroom 5701/09 (Presse 18)

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Main results of the Council

The Council discussed the latest developments in **Gaza**, as well as the humanitarian repercussions, ways to make the current ceasefire permanent and the longer-term perspective of the peace process. In response to the current crisis the EU will focus its support and assistance on the following: immediate humanitarian relief for the population of Gaza, prevention of illicit trafficking in arms and ammunition, sustained re-opening of crossing points on the basis of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, rehabilitation and reconstruction and the resumption of the peace process. The EU will take forward this agenda in close cooperation with its Quartet partners and regional actors and in line with its wider approach to the region, including its state-building efforts. To this end the EU is developing a Work Plan.

Ministers welcomed the decision by US President Barack Obama to close the **Guantanamo** detention centre within a year. Even if the primary responsibility for closing Guantanamo rests with the US, Ministers discussed whether there were ways in which they could assist the US, given the common interests in counter-terrorism, human rights and the rule of law.

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none

Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.

Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's Internet site

⁽http://www.consilium.europa.eu).

Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's Internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

PARTICIPANTS

The governments of the Member States and the European Commission were represented as follows:

Belgium:

Mr Karel DE GUCHT Minister for Foreign Affairs

Bulgaria:

Ms Gergana GRANCHAROVA Minister for European Affairs

Czech Republic:

Mr Alexandr VONDRA Deputy Prime Minister with responsibility for European

Affairs

Mr Karel SCHWARZENBERG Minister for Foreign Affairs

Denmark:

Mr Michael ZILMER-JOHNS State Secretary for Foreign and Security Policy, EU Policy

and EU Coordination

Germany:

Mr Frank-Walter STEINMEIER Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs

Estonia:

Mr Urmas PAET Minister for Foreign Affairs

Ireland:

Mr Michael MARTIN Minister for Foreign Affairs

Greece:

Ms Dora BAKOYANNI Minister for Foreign Affairs

Spain:

Mr Diego LÓPEZ GARRIDO State Secretary for the European Union

France:

Mr Bernard KOUCHNER Minister for Foreign and European Affairs

Italy:

Mr Franco FRATTINI Minister for Foreign Affairs

Cyprus:

Mr Markos KYPRIANOU Minister for Foreign Affairs

Latvia:

Mr Māris RIEKSTIŅŠ Minister for Foreign Affairs

Lithuania:

Mr Vygaudas UŠACKAS Minister for Foreign Affairs

Luxembourg:

Mr Jean ASSELBORN Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs and

Immigration

Hungary:

Ms Kinga GÖNCZ Minister for Foreign Affairs

Malta:

Mr Richard CACHIA CARUANA Permanent Representative

Netherlands:

Mr Maxime VERHAGEN
Mr Frans TIMMERMANS
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Mr Frans TIMMERMANS
Minister for European Affairs

Austria:

Mr Michael SPINDELEGGER Federal Minister for European and International Affairs

Poland:

Mr Radosław SIKORSKI Minister for Foreign Affairs

Portugal:

Mr Luís AMADO Ministro de Estado, Minister for Foreign Affairs

Romania:

Mr Cristian DIACONESCU Minister for Foreign Affairs

Slovenia:

Mr Samuel ŽBOGAR Minister for Foreign Affairs

Slovakia:

Ms Olga ALGAYEROVÁ State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Finland:

Mr Alexander STUBB Minister for Foreign Affairs

Sweden:

Mr Carl BILDT Minister for Foreign Affairs Ms Cecilia MALMSTRÖM Minister for European Affairs

United Kingdom:

Mr David MILIBAND Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

<u>Commission:</u>
Ms Benita FERRERO-WALDNER Member

General Secretariat of the Council:

Mr Javier SOLANA Secretary-General/High Representative for the CFSP

ITEMS DEBATED

MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS - Council conclusions

The Council discussed the latest developments in Gaza, notably the humanitarian repercussions, ways to make the current ceasefire permanent and the longer-term perspective of the peace process.

The discussion was enriched and inspired by recent EU meetings with Israel, the Palestinian National Authority and other partners. Following the Council meeting, High Representative Javier Solana left for the Middle East.

After the debate, the Council adopted the following conclusions:

- "1. The Council welcomes the cessation of hostilities in the Gaza Strip and calls on all parties to make the current ceasefire permanent through the full implementation of the UNSC Resolution 1860. Noting the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza, the issues which should be addressed without any delay include a sustained halt of rocket launches towards Israel, the urgent opening of the Gaza crossings on a regular and predictable basis and an effective mechanism to prevent arms and ammunition smuggling to the Gaza Strip.
- 2. The Council fully supports the Egyptian initiative and efforts to achieve a lasting ceasefire. The European Union, in close coordination with Egypt and other partners, is examining options and intends to support the sustainability of the ceasefire including through assistance on border management. At the same time the Council expresses the European Union's readiness to reactivate the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM Rafah), as soon as conditions allow, and to examine the possibility of extending its assistance to other crossing points as part of the overall EU engagement in the region. The EU welcomes the commitment of the United States to contribute to stopping arms smuggling to Gaza and is prepared to identify ways to cooperate in such efforts.
- 3. The European Union deeply deplores the loss of life during this conflict, particularly the civilian casualties. The Council reminds all parties to the conflict to fully respect human rights and comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and will follow closely investigations into alleged violations of international humanitarian law. In this regard it takes careful note of the statement by UNSG Ban Ki-moon to the Security Council on 21 January.

- 4. Gravely concerned by the critical humanitarian situation on the ground, the EU calls for the unimpeded provision and distribution of humanitarian assistance to the suffering people of Gaza. The European Union is ready to step up its already substantial emergency aid contribution and it will continue to strongly support the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and other international agencies in their efforts. The Council condemns the shelling of UNRWA infrastructure in Gaza. The EU is also prepared to work towards rehabilitation, reconstruction, the sustainable economic recovery and future economic development of the Gaza Strip. This will only be possible if the Gaza crossings are open for humanitarian assistance, commercial goods and persons. The EU supports the idea of convening an international donors' conference in Egypt. Donor efforts need to be closely coordinated with the AHLC. All future assistance will be carried out on the basis of a specific needs assessment.
- 5. In response to the current crisis the European Union will focus its support and assistance on the following: immediate humanitarian relief for the population of Gaza, prevention of illicit trafficking in arms and ammunition, sustained re-opening of crossing points on the basis of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, rehabilitation and reconstruction and the resumption of the peace process. The EU will take forward this agenda in close cooperation with its Quartet partners and regional actors and in line with its wider approach to the region including its state building efforts. To this end the EU is developing a Work Plan.
- 6. The Council strongly encourages inter-Palestinian reconciliation behind President Mahmoud Abbas which is key for peace, stability, and development and supports the mediation efforts of Egypt and the Arab League in this respect.
- 7. Reaffirming its conclusions of 8 December 2008, the European Union is convinced that an end to the current crisis must be followed by renewed and urgent efforts by the Israeli and Palestinian parties as well as the international community to establish an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, living side by side with Israel in peace and security. This can only be brought about by the urgent and successful conclusion of the peace process. The European Union reiterates its commitment to work vigorously with the other Quartet members and Arab partners and looks forward to a strong and committed participation and cooperation of the new US Administration. The EU reiterates its commitment to a comprehensive and regional approach to the resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict. It supports all efforts deployed to achieve stability, peace and security in the region. The Council reiterates that the Arab Peace Initiative offers a solid and appropriate basis for progress in this direction."

UKRAINE/RUSSIA

Over lunch, ministers debated bilateral relations with Ukraine and Russia.

The presidency and the Commission presented events planned with Russia and Ukraine during the next six months, in particular as regards ongoing negotiations on successor agreements to the partnership and cooperation agreements with both countries, as well as political dialogue meetings.

In the case of Ukraine, negotiations on a new agreement are already well advanced. As for Russia, the negotiating process is in its infancy, owing to an interruption of meetings following the Georgia conflict last summer. The presidency hopes that the negotiations can make real progress during the course of its tenure over the coming six months.

As regards political dialogue, a summit meeting with Russia is planned in May. There will also be two meetings at foreign ministers' level with Russia, one next month in Moscow and a second in April in the margins of the General Affairs and External Relations Council.

With Ukraine, a foreign ministers' troika meeting is planned next month in Prague and a meeting of the Cooperation Council in June.

OTHER ITEMS

Guantanamo

Over lunch, ministers welcomed the decision by US President Barack Obama to close the Guantanamo detention centre within a year.

Even if the primary responsibility for closing Guantanamo rests with the United States, Ministers discussed whether there were ways in which they could assist the United States, given the common interests in counter terrorism, human rights and the rule of law.

Ministers acknowledged that this raised a number of political, legal and security issues which need further study and consultation. The question of whether member states might accept former detainees is a national decision, but ministers agreed on the desirability of a common political response and so decided to explore the possibility of coordinated European action. The Justice and home affairs ministers will have to be involved in the matter.

Ministers will return to this subject when some of the elements have been further clarified.

MEETINGS IN THE MARGINS OF THE COUNCIL

- Meeting of the EU troika with Serbia
- Meeting of the EU troika with Belarus

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OTHER ITEMS APPROVED

Some external relations items were adopted without debate at the 2920th meeting on General Affairs (5485/09).