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Remarks made by High Representative Catherine Ashton after meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman

I am very pleased to be in Israel today. I just had a constructive and productive meeting with FM Lieberman. This is my second visit to the region in my capacity as High Representative/Vice-President. Yesterday I met with PM Fayyad and today I visited Gaza and Sderot. I have also met with MoD Barak and will be meeting later this evening PM Netanyahu.

There are three main objectives for my visit in Israel:

First, to discuss the situation in Gaza. I have welcomed the new policy of the Israeli government as an important step forward.

As I have always said, Israel's new policy should improve the lives of the ordinary people of Gaza while addressing the legitimate security concerns of Israel. The position of the EU is clear: the blockade is unacceptable, unsustainable and counterproductive. It is not in the interests of any of those concerned.

If we can be of value and the parties agree, the EU is ready to support a smooth handling of goods at the crossings, based on to the Agreement on Movement and Access.

I fully agree that Israel's security is of paramount importance in moving ahead. I was in Sderot today and tomorrow morning I will meet the family of Gilad Shalit and share with them my deepest sympathy.

I cannot conceive of the terrible pain that Aviva and Noam Shalit have had to endure everyday of the four years since Gilad Shalit has been abducted. Gilad must be released without delay and the Red Cross representatives must now be allowed to visit him.

P R E S S

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Second, we have discussed the peace process. I have listened carefully to the positions of both sides and hope a satisfactory way can be found to proceed to direct talks asap, which are now needed if one wishes to make further progress in the negotiations for bringing an end to the conflict.

I have therefore encouraged both the Palestinian Authority and Israel to begin discussions on all the final status issues, including security, Jerusalem and borders. The outlines of a deal are very well known.

I believe we need to see confidence building measures and at the same time avoid measures that undermine the peace process. In this respect, I have to express my deep concern about recent settlement activity in East Jerusalem.

My third objective was to emphasize the strong bond between the EU and Israel. We have a solid and vibrant partnership in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy across an extensive range of sectors. There is a huge potential to further develop these relations. I have discussed with Minister Lieberman on how best to do this in the future.

Thank you.
