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**Javier SOLANA,
EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy,
tours the ruins of Gaza**

Javier SOLANA, European Union High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), visited Gaza on Friday, 27 February during a tour of the Middle East in the run-up to the international donors' conference for the reconstruction of Gaza in Sharm el-Sheikh on 2 March.

In Gaza, Mr SOLANA toured the areas damaged during the 22-day military offensive in January and visited the ruins of the American International School, the village of Izbet Abd Rabo that was destroyed during the conflict and the Gaza Industrial Area where factories, businesses and workshops were destroyed. He also visited the UNRWA headquarters, themselves heavily damaged in the conflict, and met John GING, the UNRWA Director of Operations, as well as members of civil society, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, and the business and banking sectors.

The visit focused on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and on what could be done to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people and rebuild Gaza.

The following is an edited summary of Mr SOLANA's remarks to reporters during his visit to Gaza:

"Let me start by saying that I came to Gaza today to see by myself the situation, to see the destruction that has taken place and to show the solidarity of the EU with the people of Gaza who have suffered so much. I came here to tell them that we will be helping them in the reconstruction process. I have been very impressed with the level of destruction that has taken place. With that knowledge, I think I will be much more useful in my interventions in Sharm el Sheikh.

We all need to act to resolve with urgency the humanitarian situation of the people of Gaza. The EU – I have already said that I and will reiterate it – will help not only financially but also on the ground. As soon as the parties agree, our Border Assistance Mission at the crossing point between Rafah and Egypt will resume its activities and we are ready to help open and keep open other crossing points, and rebuild trust between the Israelis and the Palestinians. It is fundamental that

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humanitarian help and the material required for reconstructing Gaza can have access into Gaza.

Mr SOLANA paid tribute to the efforts and dedication of the director and staff of UNRWA who had done so much to help the people of Gaza during the conflict. *"I should like, from the bottom of my heart, to thank UNRWA and our friend John, the director of UNRWA, who have done so much. I should like to publicly recognise the efforts of John and his staff, who have done so much for the people here".*

Mr SOLANA said the EU would be attending the donors conference hosted by Egypt in Sharm el-Sheik on Monday, 2 March. He thought that large financial pledges would be made to fund the extensive work needed to rebuild people's houses and businesses and the life of the community in Gaza.

Asked about the prospects for the creation of a Palestinian state, Mr SOLANA said that it was vital to create a new political dynamic to bring peace to region and realise the long-held dream of establishing a Palestinian state. He stressed the importance of Palestinian unity in order to achieve this objective.
