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Media Release

Media Embargo: 00.01 (GMT)/ 01.01 (CET)/ 02.01 (Jerusalem), 4 March 2010

Ashton must visit Gaza - Call ahead of informal meeting of EU foreign ministers

The EU's foreign ministers and its High Representative for foreign affairs must insist on their right to visit the Gaza Strip, say 17 European human rights and development organisations¹ on the eve of the informal 'Gymnich' meeting of EU foreign ministers in Córdoba on 5 and 6 March.

The groups are calling on foreign ministers to take a united stance not to bow to Israel's recent practice of refusing entry to Gaza by foreign high-level representatives² and to make going to Gaza part of every visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. They are, in particular, calling on HR Ashton to visit Gaza on her first trip to the Middle East in mid-March, to see for herself the devastating impact of the two and half year old blockade of the Strip on its civilian population.

During the informal meeting, EU foreign ministers will discuss the peace process in the Middle East and the blockade just over a year after Israel's military offensive on Gaza. Homes, businesses, schools, hospitals and essential civilian infrastructure including water and power systems remain in ruins because Israel prevents construction materials entering Gaza, say the organisations.³

The group welcomes the Union's December statement calling for 'an immediate, sustained and unconditional opening of the crossings' into Gaza, but they say the EU must translate this into action by agreeing to take a strong international lead to secure an end to the blockade. The EU must also confirm that upgrading of its relations with Israel is on hold, pending tangible progress in Israel's respect for human rights and international law, which should include its actions with regard to the Gaza blockade, they say.

"Israel appears to want to stop the world from seeing what is going on in Gaza. HR Ashton and EU ministers must go and see the plight of ordinary people in Gaza who are bearing the brunt of the blockade and are unable to leave. The EU cannot accept Israel's ban on its senior representatives visiting Gaza to see how the millions of Euros from European taxpayers' are spent on vital humanitarian projects there," says Janet Symes, Head of Middle East Region, Christian Aid.

"It is time for the EU to demand that human rights and international law play a central role in the Middle East peace process. The blockade is a collective punishment for the entire civilian population where the most vulnerable, such as young children, suffer disproportionately," says Nicolas Beger, director of the EU Office of Amnesty International.

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Notes for editors

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² The Israeli government has justified its new 'no-entry' policy by saying that the presence of foreign high-level representatives would 'give the Hamas regime legitimacy'. However, various EU foreign and development ministers, European Commissioners and the former EU High Representative Javier Solana all visited Gaza after the Hamas takeover in 2007, before the Israeli government started banning such visits. No meetings or contacts with Hamas took place on such visits. During 2009, such high-level visits have been stopped, with requests by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and the Irish Foreign Minister Michael Martin to visit Gaza refused. The Irish Foreign Minister visited Gaza via the Rafah crossing from Egypt last week. The EU and its member states are providing several hundred million euros in Gaza every year, financing humanitarian aid, supporting vulnerable families, co-financing salaries of the Palestinian Authority employees in Gaza, supporting and co-financing UNRWA which is running schools and hospitals for Palestinian refugees who constitute over three-quarters of Gaza's population.

³ For more detail see the report *Failing Gaza: No rebuilding, no recovery, no more excuses* (December 2009), available to journalists on request.