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Brussels,
D/09/168
Lien A/09/72

04.02.2009

Dear Dr Lucas,

Thank you very much for your letter of 5 January, expressing your concern about the current situation in Gaza.

I fully share your assessment of the crisis which is taking a heavy toll on the civilian population in Gaza. Following the outbreak of hostilities in late December, the situation of the civilian population in Gaza, which already prior to the crisis was not being provided with essential services, worsened even further. During our visit to the region in early January, as part of the EU Troika, I called on Israel to agree to an immediate cease-fire, to unhindered access for humanitarian assistance, and to the continuation of the peace process started in Annapolis at the end of 2007.

The 26 January General Affairs and External Relations Council decided to develop an EU work plan towards a durable cease-fire. This will focus first and foremost on immediate humanitarian relief for the population of Gaza, and will include support to the prevention of illicit trafficking in arms and ammunition, the sustained re-opening of crossing points, rehabilitation and reconstruction and the resumption of the peace process.

Our priority in our relations with Israel at the moment remains to be Gaza and in particular questions of access and provision of humanitarian aid. For all these matters, dialogue with Israel is essential.

As to the question of our overall relations with Israel in the context of the Association Agreement, it was decided at the last EU-Israel Association Council in June 2008 to respond favourably to Israel's request for a significant upgrading of relations. Nothing has changed in this regard.

.../...

Dr Caroline Lucas
Member of the European Parliament
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.../...

It is obvious that the recent escalation of the situation in Gaza did not contribute to an atmosphere conducive to concluding the upgrading process with Israel. The Commission, since the beginning of the crisis, has concentrated all its contacts and discussions with Israel on the best way to deal with the emergency, and in particular access and provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Yours sincerely,

Benita Ferrero-Waldner

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*(signed in the Commissioner's
absence)*