

Informal meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers (Gymnich): Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference

eeas.europa.eu/delegations/syria/99173/informal-meeting-foreign-affairs-ministers-gymnich-remarks-high-representativevice-president_en

Check against delivery!

Good afternoon to all of you.

First of all, thank you Augusto, thank you to my friend the Minister [of State for Foreign Affairs of Portugal] Augusto Santos Silva for hosting us here today in this beautiful place, the Belém Cultural Center, and for the excellent organisation of today's meeting – also for the gastronomy. I think that all the colleagues of the Foreign Affairs Council have noticed and they are very thankful.

It has been a long meeting because we had in our agenda three very important topics. First, we started with the relationship with Africa. And I am going to jump to French since we are talking about Africa.

Nous avons beaucoup discuté de l'Afrique mais aussi nous avons discuté des derniers développements au Mali et nous avons été d'accord pour dire clairement qu'il faut respecter la Transition pacifique qui avait été commencée et que le peuple du Mali mérite. Nous sommes très préoccupés par ce coup d'État dans le coup d'État qui vient provoquer une rupture dans un processus qui était très positif et qui représente un danger pour la sécurité dans le pays.

We agreed to be more proactive with respect to Africa, more engaged, more vocal in our relationship with Africa, because in Africa there is an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment. We are not only us, Europeans, there. There are other actors who are competing to have influence on the political and economic development of Africa.

Africa will be soon the most populated region in the world, today it is already the youngest region in the world. Half of the Africans, 60% of African people are below 25 years old and if the forecast of the United Nations becomes true, in 30 years Africa will double its population to 2,000 million inhabitants. You can imagine that this requires an important attention to Africa, and to strengthen our already important political bonds.

The European Union is Africa's number one economic, development and political partner. Our Foreign Direct Investments reached €200 billion which is four times more than China. A lot of people talk about the importance of China in Africa, keep in mind that our Foreign Direct Investments are four times bigger than the Chinese ones. And we can say the same thing about our aid, our financial aid for development. In 2019, it represented €20 billion in development assistance. This magnitude is much bigger than anyone else's.

We must benefit from this engagement at the multilateral level. Together with the African countries we represent 40% of United Nations membership. But I also have to point out that the degree of cooperation within multilateral fora can be certainly improved.

We analysed the cooperation to support Africa in the post-pandemic world – during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic also. And remember the fact that the President of the Commission [Ursula von der Leyen] has also recently announced an additional €1 billion in support to African countries to overcome the COVID-19 challenge by increasing their production of vaccines.

Then we discussed about the unresolved conflicts in our Eastern neighbourhood. We need to become more effective to protect the stability of a region that has direct repercussions on us Europeans. And believe me the discussion was very long because there are so many unresolved conflicts in our Eastern neighbourhood that the Ministers went in a long discussion, going conflict by conflict and analyzing what we can do to increase the peaceful resolution of these conflicts, to increase bilateral contacts and strengthen our participation with the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), also in view of the current Swedish and upcoming Polish Chairmanship-in-office of the OSCE and the need to work more closely with the Biden administration [of the United States of America].

We agreed on the need to be more visible. Consider the participation in the International Crimea Platform this summer in Kyiv where the President of the European Council [Charles Michel] has already announced his participation.

Also, a group of [European Union] Ministers will visit the three South Caucasus countries on my behalf – to show our readiness to further engage in the region.

Certainly, we discussed about Belarus. The forced landing of the Ryanair plane from Athens to Vilnius, which route was deviated by the Belarusian regime to land in Minsk has been discussed. As the European Council said, it is unacceptable. The conclusions adopted by the leaders were clear. As you know the European Council does not take decisions, it only provides guidance and this guidance has to be converted in practical decisions by the bodies of the European Union, in particular by the Foreign Affairs Council. We need to move more swiftly with sanctions. Work has already started and the Council will decide in due time.

We also agreed to invite Ms [Sviatlana] Tsikhanouskaya for an exchange of views at the next Foreign Affairs Council in June. She already came to the Foreign Affairs Council, it is time for her to come back again.

And the third issue was the Indo-Pacific. The discussions confirmed our strong interest in becoming a strong partner for this region. Where the keywords are trade, climate, connectivity. We will work on a Joint Communication, together with the Commission and myself as High Representative, to propose a strategy for the Indo-Pacific area that

will be discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council. Next week I will travel to the region to visit the headquarters of ASEAN and Indonesia, to exchange with our partners in the preparation of this Indo-Pacific communication.

Last but not least, we had an interesting and open discussion which lasted much more than expected – and prevented us from visiting the Jerónimos [Monastery] – with the Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi about the situation in Jerusalem, in Gaza and the Middle East Peace Process.

We agreed on the need to revive the peace process and restore hope in a credible pathway towards peace and justice for Israelis and Palestinians.

We reaffirmed the solution of two-states, but also the need of not just making it a declaration, but a purpose, an objective that requires a strong engagement if we want to make it a reality. The international community cannot be expected to support reconstruction costs indefinitely. It will be the third or fourth time that Gaza has to be rebuilt; we cannot accept a new wave of violence. The status quo is not an option. We need to engage in a process that brings peace through a political engagement. We are supporting this engagement with key international and regional partners, including of course Jordan, but also a revived Middle East Quartet.

Finally, we talked about Syria and Lebanon. We consider yesterday's presidential elections in Syria neither free nor fair. They will not contribute to the settlement of the conflict nor lead to any measure of international normalisation with the Syrian regime. This is not a process that we can accept and we call for the Syrian regime to engage in a genuine political process. That is not it, and this is why we do not recognize these elections.

In Lebanon the situation is not sustainable. I have been invited to visit the country, I intend to do in the coming month. Because the Lebanese political forces must put aside their differences and take responsibility. Things are not improving in Lebanon and the country is in a big economic crisis. We will do our utmost to support solutions but at the same time we have to require the political forces of Lebanon to take their responsibilities because nobody can take their place.

Q&A

Q. (*Translated from Portuguese*) Could you please tell us about this package of sanctions which you discussed in your meeting, that is the sanctions on Belarus. Are we moving towards a more economic dimension here because in the course of this morning you were talking about potassium imports restrictions, oil products? Is there a consensus in the 27 Member States? When will this be put into practice?

Let us make things clear, who does what. The European Council - the leaders – decided... agreed because they do not take decisions from the operational point of view, they provide guidance. They tell us, to the other bodies of the European Union, how to proceed. They

agreed on a new package of personal sanctions, which was already being prepared. But additionally to that, they consider the need to go to economic sanctions – economic and sectoral sanctions. This is the guidance that the European Council provided.

[Informal Foreign Affairs Council] Gymnich today is also an informal meeting. As an informal meeting, we cannot take decisions, debates and provide guidance to the technical bodies of the European Institutions. These technical bodies, at the level of the [European] Council, had already started after the European Council. And the package of personal sanctions is almost ready. And I do not think we need to go for the next formal Foreign [Affairs] Council in order to be approved. It will be approved before because we can do it by a written procedure.

Additionally to that, on the framework of the discussion about the Eastern Partnership - because Belarus was not in the agenda specifically – certainly, we considered the guidance that we received from the European Council about economic and sectoral sanctions. And some ideas were put on the table but for sure nothing has been decided. And some consideration has been done, but the important thing is the work at the technical level, where Member States will propose ideas.

These ideas will certainly affect economic sectors. And there are not so many economic sectors that can be affected because the exports of Belarus are very much concentrated in some fields. But first, there has not been any decision because this body does not take decisions. And secondly, we have just considered how to look at these economic and sectoral sanctions that have to be decided by: first the technical bodies; second under proposal of the Member States; and thirdly approved by the Foreign [Affairs] Council in the next meeting.

At the same time, I have to tell you that in order to adapt our regulations to economic sanctions, we need a little bit more of time, not much more, but it is not automatic. We need to arrange, to adapt the legal framework to the implementation of the economic and sectoral sanctions.

Q. I was wondering if you could expand any further on how the European Union stands towards Mali could be affected by the recent political situation? Specifically I would be interested to know if the European Union training mission's presence overall will change at all and whether there are any concerns that European Union trained soldiers could have been part of this coup?

Certainly we train the Mali army and it is not the first –let us say- activity of the Mali army interfering with the political setting of the country. It is not the first time.

We are training the Mali army because Mali is being jeopardised by a strong activity of Jihadist groups, rebel groups and without a strong capacity of the army, the country would fall apart. The situation is very fluid; the last events are recent – less than one day or a couple of days ago. So, the only thing that I can tell you is that, for sure, the training mission continues there, that we had requested the immediate liberation of the President

[Bah N'Daw] and the Prime Minister [Moctar Ouane], something that has happened, and that we keep in touch with the military in order to explain them that this is not the way out of the crisis.

I was in Mali some weeks ago, explaining to the Malian authorities that this transition should not be another one again between two coups d'état and I was stressing the historical importance of this process. I am really very sorry that after having exchanged with them, a new military intervention has created a change on the dynamics, positive dynamics that started after the coup d'état and the Transition to a new attempt to build a democracy in Mali.

But I do not think that we are going to stop for the time being the training activities of the military, because they are very much engaged in fighting all over the territory of Mali and I do not think that it is going to help the country to stop this activity, but let us see how things go.

Q. Also a question, if I may, two days ago the [European] Commission announced €8 more million to help Palestine, is it enough?

The explanation that the Minister [of Foreign Affairs of Portugal Augusto] Santos Silva gave is perfect. About the question: is €8 million enough? Enough for what? For sure, it is not enough. The reconstruction of Gaza will cost hundreds of million or dollars, whatever you prefer.

And the international community, and in particular the European Union, cannot continue reconstructing every two, three years what has been destroyed on a new wave of violence. That is why I insist on the need to start another process of peacekeeping, because the status quo is not affordable. No one can believe that the Palestinian question is over, it is not over. We can consider that the Israel-Arab question is over, because with the Abraham Agreements [Peace Agreement], a lot of Arab countries have been recognising Israel, but the core of the problem – the problem is between Palestine and Israel – this has not been solved. So, we have to face the problem. We will reconstruct Gaza because these people need help, but certainly 8 million will not be enough, much more will be needed.

Q. On this ceasefire between Israel and Palestine, to what extent do you think this is consolidated following your working lunch with the Jordanian Foreign Minister? What about the recalling of the French ambassador to Israel following some declarations made on Sunday saying that there was a risk of apartheid in Israel?

About the consolidation of the ceasefire, who knows? For the time being it works. We were asking for a ceasefire at our last Foreign Affairs Council. Unhappily, only 26 out of 27 Member States supported it, but it was enough. A big majority, 26 out of 27. So we can say that the Europe Union was asking for the ceasefire as President Biden [of the United States, Joe] Biden, as the Secretary-General of the United Nations [António Guterres], as the Pope [Francis]. Everybody was asking for it in order to avoid more civilian casualties.

The ceasefire came and I am sure that it came thanks to the United States' engagement and the brokering by Egypt. In any case, the ceasefire started and it is lasting. Let us hope that it will last. But, once again, we cannot rely on ceasefires, violence, ceasefires. Security is not peace. What is needed is peace and peace will not come by miracle. It will come through political negotiations.

And there are not many different solutions. The *status quo* is not viable, as this new wave of violence has demonstrated once again. The two-state solution, we have to recognise it, we are very far away from it. Further away than ever. So, we have to put that on the table and not to just pronounce the magic words 'two-state solution', but to work and to engage on it. Because I do not see any other solution. And on the fears that some colleagues can express about possible situations, well, I prefer to work and really engage on the two-state solution, which is the only one that can provide both to Israelis and Palestinians dignity, freedom and being able to live together.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-206369>.

Nabila MASSRALI (link sends e-mail)

Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

+32 (0) 2 29 88093

+32 (0) 460 79 52 44

Peter STANO (link sends e-mail)

Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

+32 (0)460 75 45 53