



Press statement by President von der Leyen with Cypriot President Christodoulides in Larnaca

Larnaca, 8 March 2024

Dear President, dear Nikos,

Thank you very much for welcoming me and my team here to Larnaca, and in particular to the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre. We are here because Palestinians, and in particular those in Gaza, need all our help. The humanitarian situation in Gaza is dire, with innocent Palestinian families and children desperate for basic needs. Today, we are facing a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. We stand by the innocent civilians in Palestine. This is why Europe is financing a major humanitarian aid effort for Palestinians, in Gaza and in the region – EUR 250 million this year alone. But the key challenge is to get the aid to the people on the ground in Gaza. We know the difficulties faced at the land borders in Gaza, be it through the Rafah border crossing, or through the Jordan road corridor.

That is why today, the Republic of Cyprus, the European Commission, the United Arab Emirates and the United States, of course supported by other critical partners, announce our intent to open a maritime corridor to deliver much-needed additional amounts of humanitarian assistance by sea. Together, our nations intend to build on this model to deliver significant additional aid by sea. So I am extremely grateful to you Mr President, dear Nikos, and to the people of Cyprus for your leadership in establishing the Amalthea initiative. It was impressive to see and to visit the different sites and how it is evolving, supplementing the efforts to deliver significant additional aid. We are launching this Cyprus maritime corridor together: Cyprus, the European Union, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. And your relentless work to get this corridor up and running despite all the challenges is truly inspiring. We are now very close to the opening of the corridor, Saturday or Sunday. And I am very glad to see that an initial pilot operation will be launched today, thus it is the partnership that started today with the World Central Kitchen, whom I want to thank wholeheartedly for their tireless and so important work.

Mr President, dear Nikos,

Cyprus has always been a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. And thanks to the Amalthea initiative, it is proving this historical role once again today. I welcome the leadership of President Nikos Christodoulides by serving as a mediator for all parties involved. And I would like to commend the particular efforts of the President of the United Arab Emirate Mohamed bin Zayed to mobilise support to activate this corridor by securing the first of many shipments of goods to the people of North Gaza. I call on all the actors who have a role to play here, to help this corridor deliver on its potential. One thing is for sure, you can count on us.

The maritime corridor can make a real difference to the plight of the Palestinian people. But in parallel, our efforts to provide assistance to Palestinians through all possible routes of course will continue. As part of our EU Humanitarian Air Bridge operation, we have launched 41 flights, carrying over 1,800 tonnes of aid. And we will consider all other options, including air drops, if our humanitarian partners on the ground consider this effective.

But our action does not stop there. We must also focus our attention, efforts and outreach on preventing an ignition of violence across the whole region. I am in regular contact with President El-Sisi of Egypt and King Abdullah of Jordan. The situation in the Red Sea is particularly concerning with maritime security deteriorating day after day and critical infrastructure damaged due to repeated Houthi attacks. This is why we have launched the EU naval force Operation Aspides. I know that Cyprus has deployed two naval officers for this mission, and we thank you for that, Mr President. With Aspides, Europe is acting to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, working alongside our international partners.

Finally, a word on the day after. We agree that we must start preparing today, with a viable perspective. And this perspective continues to lie in the two-state solution. This requires an immediate humanitarian pause that would lead to a sustainable ceasefire. It is clear that there can be no forced displacement of Palestinians. And no blockade of Gaza. But it is equally clear that Gaza

cannot be a safe haven for terrorists. And that we will keep on calling for the immediate, unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas. Europe will continue to help build momentum for this political horizon.

So thank you again, Mr President, dear Nikos. And I want to thank everyone working here at the JRCC. You will play a central role in the Amalthea initiative. You are already playing an important and central role overall in the region here. You embody Europe's solidarity at its best. And I know that the people of Cyprus themselves know what suffering and loss can feel like. Therefore, we in the European Union stand by you, Mr President, in your efforts to resume the peace talks for the solution of the Cyprus question. Here too, you can count on us.

Many thanks.

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