



EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana arrives for the start of an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers in Salzburg yesterday. Man at right is unidentified.

EU to cut aid if Hamas fails to renounce violence

'Israeli plan to finalise borders is act of war'

AFP, Salzburg/Damascus

The European Union warned yesterday it will cut funding to a new Hamas-led Palestinian government if it fails to renounce violence and recognise Israel.

Speaking at a meeting of EU foreign ministers, External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said the bloc has done more than any other foreign partner to support the caretaker Palestinian government.

The 25-nation EU has released 120 million euros for Palestinians since January elections in which the militant Islamic group swept to power, threatening to derail the Middle East peace process.

But the EU official noted that the 25-nation bloc has set out conditions against which it will review

funding once a new government is fully in place.

"The new government's positions on violence, on recognition of Israel and on existing agreements like the (Middle East peace) road map remain absolutely crucial," Ferrero-Waldner told reporters in Salzburg, Austria.

"We want to remain a reliable partner for the Palestinian people, but we will not go soft on our principles ... Money will not flow to the new authority unless it seeks peace by peaceful means."

The radical Islamic group this week presented proposals for forming a Palestinian coalition government with the Fatah party of President Mahmud Abbas, in the search for an elusive deal on sharing power.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana defended the EU's decision

to keep funding the caretaker Palestinian government.

"The (Palestinian) Authority has a gigantic deficit, which could expand even further," he said. "What we have said is that we don't want to abandon the Palestinian people."

He underlined that Hamas remains on an EU blacklist of terrorist organisations. "So we can't cooperate with them legally," he said, but at the same time: "We have to find ways of supporting the Palestinian people."

Asked if Hamas could be removed from the EU blacklist if it meets the conditions, which would allow aid to continue, the EU official added: "If they do so, yes."

Under the Palestinian constitution, Hamas has three weeks to form a government, but the charter also provides for another 14-day

extension. Abbas tasked him with assembling the next cabinet on February 21.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Islamic radical group Hamas's supreme Khaled Meshal slammed yesterday the Israeli government's plan to finalise the country's borders by 2010 as a "declaration of war".

Meshal, the Damascus-based political chief, told AFP in an interview that "Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Palestinian territories is a declaration of war against the Palestinian people."

The head of the militant group that won an upset victory in the Palestinian territories' January 25 election denounced Olmert's plans to fix Israel's permanent borders by 2010 through unilateral withdrawals from the West Bank.

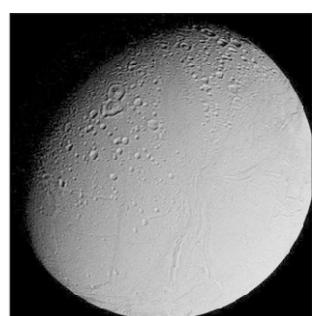


PHOTO: REUTERS

One of Saturn's moons, Enceladus, is seen in an image captured by the Voyager 2 satellite. Enceladus is spewing out a giant plume of water vapour that is probably feeding one of the Saturn's rings, scientists said on Thursday.

Saturn moon spewing water vapour

REUTERS, Washington

One of Saturn's moons, Enceladus, is spewing out a giant plume of water vapour that is probably feeding one of the planet's rings, scientists said on Thursday.

The findings, published in the journal *Science*, suggest that tiny Enceladus could have a liquid ocean under its icy surface which in theory could sustain primitive life, similar to Jupiter's moon Europa. The plume was spotted by Cassini, a joint US-European spacecraft that is visiting Saturn.

"We realise that this is a radical conclusion – that we may have evidence for liquid water within a body so small and so cold," said Carolyn Porco, Cassini imaging team leader at Space Science Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

"However, if we are right, we have significantly broadened the diversity of solar system environments where we might possibly have conditions suitable for living organisms."

Scientists have long known that many of Saturn's moons have water. They took an especially close look at Enceladus because it seemed to have a smooth surface – suggesting recent geological activity that, in turn, could mean liquid water.

EU vows diplomacy can still solve Iran crisis

AFP, Salzburg

The European Union vowed yesterday to press on with efforts to seek a diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear crisis, which it still believes is possible despite this week's escalation of the standoff.

"We still can reach a diplomatic solution, we want a diplomatic solution," said EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Salzburg, Austria.

"They should take the hands that we have held out to them to come to a compromise solution," she added.

The Europeans have spearheaded efforts to engage Tehran diplomatically over its nuclear plans,

behalf of Tehran.

Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, whose country currently holds the 25-nation bloc's rotating presidency, added: "We will continue to work on a diplomatic solution."

"We are entering a new phase now," she added, referring to the referral the week of the Iran issue to the UN Security Council in New York, after efforts at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) failed to break the deadlock.

"We remain committed to the same goals as before," she added.

The Europeans have spearheaded efforts to engage Tehran diplomatically over its nuclear plans,

which the United States in particular suspects of providing cover for work to develop a nuclear weapon.

But those efforts were suspended after Tehran resumed sensitive atomic activities, which it had renounced under a November 2004 accord with the Europeans in Paris.

Also Friday, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana refused to rule out eventual UN sanctions against Tehran.

"Let's wait and see what the Security Council will do. We must weigh up all options," he told the Austrian daily *Der Standard* in an interview.

"They should take the hands that we have held out to them to come to a compromise solution," she added.

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