

EU foreign ministers express alarm over humanitarian situation in Gaza

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By Agence France Presse (AFP)

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BRUSSELS: European Union foreign ministers expressed deep concern Monday about the chaos on the Gaza Strip border with Egypt and unveiled a new plan for getting aid to the Palestinians. "The council is deeply concerned about recent events in Gaza and the grave disturbances at the border between Gaza and Egypt," the ministers said in a statement released during their meeting in Brussels.

Several hundred thousand Palestinians have swarmed into Egypt since militants blew up the Rafah border barricades six days ago, after a punishing Israeli lockdown of the Hamas-run territory cut vital fuel and aid supplies.

Shops in Rafah were running out of stocks after Egypt on Sunday began preventing trucks coming from Cairo to border towns, where authorities have imposed a security cordon to prevent Palestinians travelling further afield.

The ministers said the EU "reiterates its grave concern at the humanitarian situation in Gaza and calls for the continuous provision of essential goods and services, including fuel and power supplies."

The EU "calls on Israel to fulfill its obligations to Gaza."

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the 27-member bloc needed to encourage Israel "to do all that is necessary to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the population of Gaza."

He and his colleagues said that the EU would continue to provide humanitarian assistance and "stands ready to assist in the economic rehabilitation of Gaza."

The EU's executive body announced it had set up a new mechanism - dubbed PEGASE - which from February 1 would channel aid to help build a Palestinian state.

In line with the Palestinian Authority's development plan, the mechanism would provide assistance in the areas of governance, social development, economic and private-sector development, and public infrastructure. The previous plan to get money to needy Palestinians without any reaching Hamas, which is on the EU's "terror" blacklist, funneled in some \$280 million from 19 international donors.

The EU "is strongly committed to support the Palestinian Authority's reform and development priorities," said External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner. - **AFP**