

EU appreciates Kingdom's special role in region - Sparre

By Hani Hazaimeh

AMMAN - The EU stresses the important role Jordan plays in promoting the stability of the region and its special role regarding the holy sites in Jerusalem, Swedish Ambassador to the Kingdom Charlotta Sparre said in a recent interview with The Jordan Times.

"Jordan is a moderating voice in this region and it plays a very important role and the country has the most to gain from peace and potentially has the most to lose if peace is not achieved," Sparre, whose country assumed the EU presidency on July 1, 2008, said.

She added that the EU remains committed to a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, on the basis of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, the terms of reference of the Madrid conference, including land for peace, the roadmap, the agreements previously reached by the parties and the Arab Peace Initiative.

"The EU reiterates its commitment to the two-state solution with an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable Palestinian state, comprising the West Bank and Gaza, living side by side in peace and security with the state of Israel," the Swedish envoy said, adding that the EU is very concerned about the recent incidents in East Jerusalem and is closely following the situation around Al Aqsa Mosque.

"We urge all parties to refrain from any provocative action that could further inflame tensions or lead to violence. Everyone must take action to avoid escalation. If there is to be genuine peace, a way must be found to resolve the status of Jerusalem as the future capital of two states, and to urgently enter into serious peace negotiations on all other final status issues," Sparre said.

She highlighted that the continued settlement activities, house demolitions and evictions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including in East Jerusalem, remain a serious concern for the EU, urging the government of Israel "to immediately end these settlement activities, including so-called natural growth, and to dismantle all outposts erected since March 2001".

The EU reiterates that the settlements are illegal under international law and constitute an obstacle to peace, said the EU official, stressing the EU will not recognise any changes to the pre-1967 borders other than those agreed by both parties.

Sparre said the EU is closely following the situation and has regular contacts with all parties in the region as well as with the US and other partners in the Quartet, underlining that "the region cannot afford to stop believing in the chance of achieving peace. Everyone has to do their part to build trust among all parties. We need to stop playing the blame game because it will not lead us anywhere... we have to look where we have common concern".

Sparre, who has served as Sweden's ambassador to the Kingdom since September 2008, said since her country assumed the presidency of the EU, its focus has been on putting Europe on the Jordanian map in different ways, by engaging both with the government and society at large, and on presenting Europe as the union of 27 member states.

She added that focus was also placed on moving forward Jordan's request to enhance its relations with Europe, which was made during a session of the European Council in 2008 and since then has been a subject of discussion.

"The two sides are now working on a number of technical areas to see how we can enhance relations in terms of important issues like transport, energy, climate change, environment and water," she said, adding that the EU is considering how it can support Jordan's efforts in the political and socio-economic reform processes.

With regards to the EU association council meeting that took place yesterday, Sparre said the meeting included dialogue on a broad range of issues, including bilateral relations between Jordan and the EU, especially the issue of enhanced status, the regional situation in the Middle East, and other issues of mutual interest.

"Hopefully by next year, during the meetings of the Association Council in 2010, the two sides will be able to agree on a new action plan, including approving Jordan's enhanced status request," she added.

The enhanced status process builds on existing relations between Jordan and the EU, Sparre said, adding that it will assist in deepening relations in a wide range of areas and aim at a higher degree of harmonisation and standardisation of legislation, and open up possibilities for more trade and exchange between the EU and Jordan.

At the cultural exchange level, the ambassador said, student exchange programmes are increasing each year, and there are currently two university cooperation programmes: the **Erasmus Mundus External Windows Programme and the Tempus Programme.**

"Twenty universities - 11 European and nine in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon - are working together. This programme includes five universities in Jordan where students from the EU have the possibility to come to the Middle East to study and Jordanian students can study in Europe," she said.

She added that in the past, most European students coming to Jordan were interested in studying Arabic only, while now some are interested in studying other subjects. The Tempus Programme is a cooperation with Jordanian universities in building an educational support system for children with special needs.

Two issues that the Swedish EU presidency has decided to emphasise are strengthening the role of women in society and climate change, Sparre noted.

"It is important to get the whole of the society to realise that unless we take into consideration the thinking, the knowledge, the experience and the know-how of both men and women, society as a whole will lose out politically, economically and culturally," she said, adding that greater participation of women in society could lead to better economic development.

There is a lot to be done to address ignorance and fear among the society on this issue, she said, adding that the social contribution is the key factor and civil society has an important role in changing society's perspective and raising awareness among the public by explaining to them the importance of accepting women working side by side with men.

"The civil societies need to go and sit with the people in the village and talk to them and see what they think and discuss with them this issue and encourage them to accept their daughters' rights to work and contribute in the enhancement of the living conditions of their communities," she said, stressing that work also needs to be done in schools to address stereotypes.

Moreover, Sparre said climate change is one of the most important issues in the world today, and has been given top priority during the Swedish presidency.

"A lot of work is currently being done ahead of the global summit (COP15) taking place in Copenhagen in December," she said, citing a conference on climate change that was arranged by the EU in partnership with the Ministry of Environment and Jordan Europe Business Association on November 9 at Colombia University, which aimed at creating awareness among the public on the importance of addressing the challenges of climate change.

"Jordan is doing a good job and is strongly engaged in this issue, but much remains to be done. The Copenhagen conference is a good chance for the developed countries to discuss means of assisting the developing countries in their efforts aimed at securing a better environment," she said.

She noted that for its part, the EU has made commitments in this regard, such as cutting down carbon emissions. The EU is also prepared to come up with a financial support mechanism for global solutions, she added, expressing hope for more cooperation in the years to come.

"The climate change issue doesn't have any boundaries. It is not possible for one country alone to deal with it. This is a subject that needs collective effort. All of us share the responsibility in protecting the environment and all of us have to do our part in order to address challenges facing the environment," Sparre concluded.

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