

Brussels, 7 March 2008

Commissioner Špidla to visit Israel and the Palestinian Territory

Vladimír Špidla, EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, will today arrive in the Middle East for a four-day visit to strengthen the social dimension of EU cooperation in the region. Commissioner Špidla will hold talks with ministers as well as with local employers' and workers' organisations representatives from both Israel and the Palestinian Territory. In the course of his visit, the Commissioner will also meet with peace activists, NGOs and journalists.

"A political solution to ensure stability and prosperity in the Middle East has to take in a strong human dimension, said Commissioner Špidla. Promoting social inclusion and economic development go hand in hand in this process and are essential building blocks for peace in the region."

Commissioner Špidla will also highlight the importance of strengthening the role of women in political, social, economic and cultural spheres, as well as combating discrimination. On the occasion of International Women's Day, Commissioner Špidla will visit development projects in the Palestinian Territory aimed at empowering women in the region and promoting decent work for all. The objective will be to discuss and further explore the role that women can play in building peace.

"Women are often disproportionately affected by conflict and other threats to human security, such as poverty," added Commissioner Špidla. "At the same time, they have an important role to play in dialogue and mediation."

In Israel, Commissioner Špidla will, inter alia, hold meetings with Minister of Trade, Industry and Labour, Eliyahu Yishai; Minister of Pensioner Affairs, Rafi Eitan and Minister of Welfare and Social Services, Diaspora, Society and the Fight Against Anti-Semitism, Yitzhak Herzog on enhancing cooperation on social matters in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy EU-Israel Action Plan. In the Palestinian Territory, the Commissioner will meet the Minister of Labour and Planning, Samir Abdullah and Minister of Tourism and Women's Affairs, Kholoud Frances De'ibes. He will also hear from representatives of the Palestinian Shippers' Council, Palestinian Chambers of Commerce and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions. Finally, he will visit two EU-funded projects that work towards enhancing the role of women in the labour market and helping women to play a greater role in the search for peace.

The visit will facilitate dialogue on social matters in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plans. It also comes as the EU steps up cooperation with Mediterranean countries in the fields of gender equality and employment as part of the Mediterranean Partnership launched in Barcelona in 1995. It aims to improve understanding of policy responses developed in both regions, find the best approaches and exchange best practices to address common issues in the context of globalisation.

The Commissioner's visit to the region comes ahead of the first EuroMed Ministerial Conference on Employment taking place in Morocco in November 2008, which will bring together all 37 partner countries and the Commission.

For more information see:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/international_cooperation/euromed_workshop_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/women/index.htm