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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Council

Subject: Common approach and organization of medical evacuations of wounded citizens from Gaza
- Information from the Belgian delegation, supported by the French, Irish, Italian, Luxembourg, Maltese, Netherlands and Portuguese delegations

Delegations will find in Annex an information note from the Belgian delegation, supported by the French, Irish, Italian, Luxembourg, Maltese, Netherlands and Portuguese delegations, on the above mentioned subject to be raised under “Any other business” at the meeting of the EPSCO Council (Health) on 30 November 2023.

Common approach and organization of medical evacuations of wounded citizens from Gaza

1. Context

Since 7 October, OCHA reports 11078 Palestinian fatalities across Gaza, with two third of victims being women and children. Due to the collapse of services and communications at hospitals in Gaza, the number of casualties in Gaza has not been updated for the last days. After 38 days of crisis, the humanitarian situation in Gaza keeps on deteriorating. (Source: Echo crisis report n° 11, Middle East, Nov 14th).

Belgium recently increased its contribution to UN humanitarian operations in the region to €2 million. In response to a request from Egypt, Belgium is also preparing to send humanitarian equipment; shelter equipment, medical devices and medication, in order to support the displaced population of Gaza and injured civilians.

2. Medical evacuation of wounded citizens from Gaza

Belgium had several contacts with the World Health Organization about the possibility of caring for injured civilians from Gaza. Medical evacuations are one part of a solidarity response we can provide for the population in Gaza. Belgium is ready to offer its assistance and support to medical evacuation systems in place in order to provide quality care to Palestinian citizens in Gaza who may require advanced care. We can welcome a certain number of wounded patients or patients with severe health problems which cannot be treated in Gaza, as soon as is possible, given the complexity of the situation. WHO is, after the consultations with Belgium, looking into the possibility and practicalities of medical evacuations from Gaza.

In case a medical evacuation system is set up, EU coordination through the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) will be crucial. The UCPM-mechanism allows for international organizations to make a request for assistance. In this case, the UCPM-mechanism can and might be activated by the WHO. The request for assistance is then sent by the ERCC to all member and participating states. All countries can reply, either by offering medical evacuation transport capacity or hospital capacity or the combination. The UCPM mechanism always relies on the voluntary offers of member and participating states for transport and beds. The UCPM, headed by the Emergency Response Coordination Center (ERCC) can cover and organize the medical evacuation, though does not cover for the stay and treatment of patients, which is normally taken care of by the country offering help. Reflection and decision making on patients return is also crucial at European level.

3. **Belgian proposal**

Belgium is calling for maximum coordination between the various players, including at European level. We urge for a common approach and organization for medical evacuations of citizens from Gaza as is currently the case for the Ukrainian crisis; a well-organized system, headed by the ERCC with many Member States transporting and/or receiving patients in need for medical care. Belgium stands ready to actively participate in these medical evacuations if they were to be decided.