

Tunisia and the European Union: a solid, confident and forward-looking partnership.

From the outset, 2010 has been an eventful year for relations between Tunisia and the European Union. In adopting the latest National Indicative Programme, the Union has just allocated €240 million in financial support to Tunisia for the period 2011 to 2013. With the Action Plan approved in 2005 coming to an end this year, in March Tunisia presented its proposal on establishing 'advanced status' in its relations with the EU. The negotiations on this should take up the rest of the year. We hope to agree on greater political cooperation and stronger EU support for Tunisia's reform priorities.

The European Union itself is going through a period of profound change. The entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in December 2009 has given us a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, who is also Vice-President of the new European Commission which took office almost two months ago. Ms Ashton's dual role will help to increase the consistency of our external action. These improvements should be particularly noticeable in the EU's neighbourhood thanks to President Barroso's decision to appoint the first ever Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy.

As the European Commissioner responsible for this portfolio, I am determined to work tirelessly to deepen the already very solid relations between Tunisia and the European Union. Tunisia is undoubtedly in a strong position thanks to its economic and social achievements, and the excellent international cooperation it has with its partners. More broadly, I am convinced that we have not yet fully exploited the potential for ties between the Maghreb countries and the EU. Such is the stability of the region that we should be able to set more ambitious objectives for the medium and long term, both in our bilateral relations and in regional cooperation. I might add that I was very eager to pay my first bilateral working visit to a Maghreb country.

A few key figures demonstrate the healthy state of EU-Tunisia relations: between 1995 and 2009, around €1.7 billion in financial assistance and €2.8 billion in loans from the European Investment Bank supported reform and modernisation in Tunisia. The EU accounts for 72% of Tunisian exports and 68% of its imports. Investment by European companies in Tunisia is extremely strong.

Given this very positive picture, it is worth asking what the EU thinks it can offer Tunisia and what it expects from its partner. The Commission is ready to engage in detailed discussions to identify shared objectives which can pave the way for 'advanced status' in the European Neighbourhood Policy. As a starting point, we would suggest taking the results of the current Action Plan, the Tunisian proposals and the EU's analysis of those proposals. In parallel, the EU will of course continue to incorporate and back Tunisia's reforms.

Clearly, the very concept of 'advanced status' implies a higher level of ambition in setting common objectives. This level of ambition must apply to all areas: political relations,

economic development, trade and investment, social reform, cooperation in justice and freedom, and sectoral cooperation on the economy, energy, and elsewhere. But it must also apply to human rights and the rule of law. When compared to other Mediterranean partners, Tunisia is very well placed in most of these areas. However, in some areas more progress is definitely possible and necessary. The challenge is to achieve uniform progress in all sectors. After all, a society which is as educated and developed as Tunisia's, with a large and active middle class, should be able to flourish in order to consolidate its economic and social accomplishments. Without this balance, it will be difficult to take full advantage of the remarkable progress achieved to date.

For thirty years, the European Union's support to Tunisia has not faltered and the Commission has always promoted our ties. We will not let up in our efforts if we can show that tangible results are being achieved in all areas of our cooperation. The discussions on 'advanced status' are an opportunity to bring fresh impetus to this firm political commitment. As I end this visit to Tunis, barely two months after the new Commission took office, I am convinced that we have laid the foundations for mutual trust and understanding, and that now, more than ever, we are in a position to have a constructive and ambitious dialogue which looks towards the future.