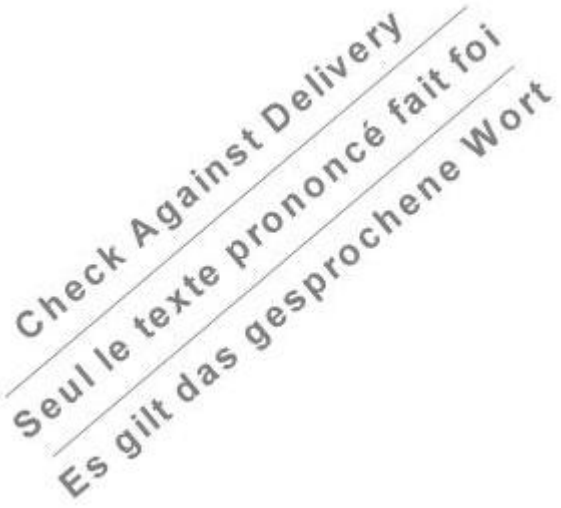
SPEECH/12/272

Catherine Ashton

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission

Speech on Syria



European Parliament

Strasbourg, 17 April 2012

Mr. President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament, we are all absolutely appalled by the horrendous levels of violence we have witnessed in Syria. Regime forces have bombarded cities with no regard for civilians. Violence has not spared children. We all want, above everything, the violence and killings to stop and we are all extremely concerned by the potential for further militarization and escalation of the conflict. The increased violence that we saw leading to the ceasefire deadline of 12 April was unacceptable and the reports about shelling in the city of Homs and civilians killed in Hama & Deraa are extremely disturbing. Violence has abated but it is not enough.

Once again, I urge, in the strongest possible terms that the cessation of violence is real and that Kofi Annan's plan is implemented immediately and in its entirety.

The situation remains fragile and unstable - the violence in Homs, Hana, Aleppo are tragic reminders.

The UN Security Council adopted unanimously – and I emphasize the unanimity - on Saturday a resolution approving the immediate deployment of an advance team of up to 30 military observers to Syria to begin reporting on the implementation of a full cessation of armed violence.

They left for Syria on Sunday and they are now on the ground starting their work. This is a very important development for the implementation of the UN-League of Arab States Special Envoy Kofi Annan's six point plan.

Together with our EU representatives at the UNSC – to whom I pay tribute for their work and engagement - and all our Member States, I have spared no effort to ensure that the international community speaks with one voice

I and my services have engaged in particular with Russia and China – last time in the margins of the G8 meeting in Washington last week – to seek their support and a change in their position.

The UNSC resolution presents, finally, a unified call from the international community to the Syrian regime to (and I quote) "the urgent, comprehensive and immediate implementation by the Syrian government of all the elements of the Envoy's six-point proposal in their entirety".

This is not a matter of choice. The 6 point plan is not optional. The government has to implement it fully: troops and heavy weapons must be withdrawn from population centres, peaceful demonstrations and freedom of association must be respected, provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting must be ensured.

Only through a credible and sustained halt in violence, Kofi Annan will be able to develop a peaceful and inclusive and Syrian led democratic transition that responds to the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians.

We are watching closely. We have called on all parties to comply with his plan but given the government's responsibility and the record of broken promises and unfulfilled commitments, this resolution is an opportunity for the Regime to change course and cooperate fully.

Unanimous action is what we have been calling for since the beginning of the crisis and now it is of utmost importance that the members of the UN Security Council continue to support Kofi Annan in his efforts, and ensure that a fully-fledged observation mission in Syria is operationalized without delay. China and Russia must continue to play a key role in bringing a solution to the conflict, using all their influence to ensure the UNSC resolution is fully implemented.

I have also personally expressed my support to the Special Envoy Annan, and told him as well as the Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, with whom I met yesterday, that the EU and its Member States stand ready to provide any required support to the observation mission

In our cooperation with the League of Arab States, we have already created the League of Arab States Situation Room to improve communications and we are providing training to develop their analysis and ability to respond to crisis situations.

Last week I convened the Crisis Platform again bringing together all the relevant services in the EEAS and the Commission under the chairmanship of Secretary General Pierre Vimont (ECHO, DEVCO, CMPD, Crisis Coordinator, CPCC, EUMS and our network of Delegations).

We are putting all our instruments together, coordinating closely with Kristalina Georgieva and reaching out to all the neighbouring countries of Syria (both Ambassadors in Brussels and the authorities on the ground). We are also working closely with Member States, ensuring an effective and coordinated EU response.

We have suspended all types of cooperation: bilateral cooperation, Syria's participation in regional programmes, and the EIB with whom we work closely, has also suspended all its loan operations and technical assistance to Syria. We have nevertheless maintained aid that benefits the Syrian population, students, human rights defenders and the opposition.

Those programmes with Syrian students and universities are also continuing. ECHO is very active and we are already providing humanitarian assistance to the Syrian crisis and will help with shelter, medical supplies, food and whatever is needed. Together with Member States, the EU has put together a contribution of 29 Million EUR in humanitarian aid to Syria and affected neighbouring countries.

Support to neighbouring countries is also essential. I personally discussed the situation in Turkey with FM Davutoglu. The humanitarian and security situation on the Turkish border is critical and the Turkish response has been excellent with fast and professional support to the 25000 refugees in its territory. I have offered the assistance of the EU to Turkey for whatever is needed to help and support the incoming refugees and FM Davutoglu with whom I remain in close contact.

It is important to be fast and creative, liaising closely with local Ministries. Many of the displaced populations in neighbouring countries do not live in camps but with families and that is why we are looking into broader and wider support, including assistance to host families and support to the regions and populations most directly affected by the inflow of Syrian citizens, particularly in the fields of health and education.

To do this (Together with Commissioner Fule) I have proposed as a matter of urgency a Commission Special Measure to reserve 23 Million EUR for funds to support Syrian Civil Society and Refugees and populations in neighbour countries.

Besides our assistance, I want to make clear that we are ready to continue to impose sanctions and restrictive measures as long as repression continues.

The last round of sanctions was approved in the Foreign Affairs Council of 23 March and we are working on a new set of sanctions.

It is important that our Delegation remains open in Damascus for as long as the security situation permits. We need to have eyes and ears on the ground and be close to the Syrian population. The Syrian people have asked us not to leave. We are hosting several diplomats of Member States that decided to suspend the activity of their own Embassies (Spain, Italy, Belgium and Netherlands).

A final word on the engagement with the Syrian opposition groups, a critical issue where the EP has a special role to play. Our main objective remains to encourage all opposition groups to put aside their differences and work jointly towards a stronger coordination and agree on the way forward for an orderly transition that is inclusive and democratic.

They need to build a common vision for the future of Syria where all Syrians from all backgrounds and affiliations are free and equal. I have instructed the EEAS to continue its meetings with opposition groups at levels – and to reach out to minority groups - to encourage them in this approach.

Mr President and Honourable Members, the future of Syria belongs to the Syrian people. Their lives, their rights, their aspirations must be respected. Assad must now match his words with deeds. His people want freedom and peace and we must do everything possible to realize this goal.