Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Written Ministerial Statement on the General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council

2011-10-17

In a written statement the Minister for Europe David Lidington said:

The Foreign Affairs Council and General Affairs Council were held on 10-11 October in Luxembourg. My Rt. Hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I represented the UK.

Foreign Affairs Council (FAC)

The FAC was chaired by Baroness Ashton. A provisional report of the meeting, and all Conclusions adopted, can be found at

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/125028.pdf

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

Although BiH was not a formal agenda item, Ministers agreed Conclusions which reaffirmed the EU's support for the continuation of the EU's military force's (EUFOR Althea) executive mandate. The Conclusions also included a reference to 'looking forward to discussions' on the future of the Office of the High Representative (OHR).

belarus

Ministers agreed to renew the EU's restrictive measures against belarus, and added sixteen new names to the travel ban and assets freeze list. There was broad agreement that the EU should not consider renewing a dialogue with the belarusian authorities until all political prisoners have been released and rehabilitated. Ministers also endorsed ongoing work by Commissioner Stefan Fule on engaging civil society in belarus.

Ukraine

Ministers expressed concern about the trial and upcoming verdict on Yulia Tymoshenko. There was a discussion about the impact the verdict might have on finalising the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine.

The day after the FAC, Yuliya Tymoshenko was sentenced to seven years in prison. Speaking after the verdict the Foreign Secretary said:

"The conviction of the Ukrainian opposition politician, Yuliya Tymoshenko, by a court in Kyiv is deeply concerning. Independent legal experts including the Danish Helsinki Committee have

concluded that Ms Tymoshenko's trial was subject to numerous and serious violations of fundamental legal principles, in direct contradiction of common European values.

"Ukraine says it wants to join the EU one day. The UK supports that objective. But that cannot happen until Ukraine can show that it adheres to the highest democratic standards, including respect for human rights, the rule of law and an independent, transparent and fair judicial process. The conviction of Ms Tymoshenko and the ongoing cases against other former members of the government call into question Ukraine's commitment to these values. This could pose a major obstacle to the signature and ratification of the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU."

EU-China Summit

Ministers reviewed preparations for the fourteenth EU-China Summit, which takes place in China on 25 October. The Foreign Secretary stressed the need for the EU to focus on increased market access for EU businesses. He also urged the EU to continue to raise human rights issues at the highest level, and underlined the importance of global cooperation on cyber security.

Southern Neighbourhood

Baroness Ashton set out the results of the Tunisian Task Force meeting of 28-29 September. She had co-chaired the meeting with the Prime Minister of Tunisia, which had also been attended by Member States, European institutions, the European Investment Bank, the EBRD, the World Bank, the Africa Bank and representatives from the private sector. Around €4 billion was pledged to Tunisia over the next 3 years.

On Egypt, concern was expressed by many Ministers about the recent outbreaks of violence. There was broad agreement on the importance of protecting freedom of religion and belief.

Ministers agreed Conclusions on Libya which:

Reaffirmed the EU's support for the National Transition Council.

Welcomed the continuation of the operation to enforce UNSCR 1973 and ensure the protection of the Libyan population.

Welcomed the adoption of UNSCR 2009 and the return of Libya to the UN as represented by the National Transitional Council.

Stressed the need for all in Libya to respect all international obligations and the rule of law.

Expressed concern about the dissemination of conventional weapons in Libya.

Set out the EU's willingness to work under UN coordination to consider Libyan needs in the fields of democratisation, rule of law, institution-building, security sector reform and police training.

Ministers agreed Conclusions on Syria which condemned the ongoing brutal repression by the Syrian regime. Ministers expressed disappointment with the failure of the UN Security Council to

adopt a resolution against Syria. They reiterated their determination to continue with targeted sanctions against the Syrian regime.

On Yemen, Ministers agreed Conclusions which stressed concern about the situation in the country. They called for President Saleh to sign and implement the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative. And they welcomed the report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and urged the authorities in Yemen to act on its recommendations.

On the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Foreign Secretary and others stressed the need to hold out the possibility of meaningful market access to the neighbourhood, in exchange for real political and democratic reforms.

Middle East Peace Process

Ministers agreed Conclusions which reiterated their support for Baroness Ashton's efforts on behalf of the EU to re-launch the Peace Process. There was an appeal for both parties to resume negotiations under the terms set out in the Quartet Statement of 23 September.

Ministers expressed their disappointment with the recent settlement expansion in the East Jerusalem settlement of Gilo. Baroness Ashton briefed Ministers on the Quartet Envoys' meeting of 9 October in Brussels and plans to invite the parties to meet in the coming days. The Foreign Secretary emphasised the need for continued EU unity in response to any resolutions proposed at the United Nations in New York.

Iran

The discussion on Iran focused on two areas: the EU's growing concern over human rights, and Iran's nuclear programme. On human rights, Ministers agreed to add twenty-nine names to its sanctions list, in addition to the thirty-two officials previously agreed in April. On the nuclear issue, Baroness Ashton briefed Ministers on E3+3 talks in New York in the margin of the UN General Assembly and her meeting with the Iranian Foreign Minister. She also outlined plans for taking forward talks with Iran. The Foreign Secretary made the following statement:

"I welcome the EU's agreement today to impose restrictive measures on a further twenty-nine Iranians responsible for grave human rights abuses. Those targeted include Government Ministers, members of the security forces, prison staff and judiciary responsible for serious human rights violations.

"In recent months the human rights situation in Iran has continued to deteriorate. As we mark World Day against the Death Penalty we should recall that Iran has now executed over 500 people this year, including a 17 year old boy. The government has violently suppressed protests over the mismanagement of a lake in north-west Iran, and families of a number of journalists have been arrested and harassed. We will continue to identify and list those who seriously violate the human rights of the Iranian people.

“Today’s decision sends a clear message to every individual on this list, and others in the Iranian regime, that we will not stand by. They will be held to account for their actions and should not involve themselves in the appalling abuses we continue to witness.”

EU External Representation

Ministers had a brief informal exchange on EU external representation in international organisations. The Foreign Secretary said we supported effective external action by the EU, in accordance with the Treaties. But we needed to ensure that this did not affect the balance of competences between the EU and Member States; and that Member States remained free to act where they had the right to do so. He agreed that the EAS should propose effective arrangements in line with these principles.

General Affairs Council (GAC)

The GAC was chaired by the Polish EU Presidency (Mikolaj Dowgielewicz, State Secretary for European Affairs). A draft record of the meeting can be found at:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/genaff/125036.pdf

Cohesion Policy

Ministers heard a presentation by Commissioner Hahn (Regional Policy) of proposals for rules on implementing the EU’s policy on economic and social cohesion in 2012-20.

Growth-Enhancing Measures

The Presidency presented its report “Towards a European consensus on growth” (see link below).

http://pl2011.eu/sites/default/files/users/shared/spotkania_i_wydarzenia/presidency_report_on_growth.pdf

The report identifies potential growth-enhancing measures which might help the EU overcome the current economic crisis.

G20 Summit in Cannes

Ministers discussed with Commissioner Sefcovic (Inter-Institutional Relations and Administration) preparations for the G-20 Summit in Cannes on 3-4 November. The Commissioner set out proposed EU priorities: the Eurozone and the global economic recovery; the resilience of the international monetary system; tackling commodity prices; providing a way forward for Doha and the WTO; development; food security; a strong message on Climate Change and Durban; and the proposed Financial Transaction Tax (FTT). I stressed that the UK was firmly against promoting a FTT at the G20 Summit.

Preparation of the October European Council

Ahead of the GAC, the President of the Council, Van Rompuy, joined Ministers by video link to discuss preparations for the Council. He explained that the Council had been pushed back to

Sunday 23 October to allow Heads of State and Government to consider issues relating to Greece, the European banks and the Eurozone governance more comprehensively as a package. I argued that any future institutional changes to governance in the Eurozone had to protect fully the interests of all 27 Member States, and there had to be clear language to that effect in the European Council Conclusions.

I also stressed the need for the Council Conclusions to address some significant foreign policy developments, particularly Libya.

I will deposit copies of this note in the libraries of both Houses. And I will also continue to update Parliament on future Foreign and General Affairs Councils.

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