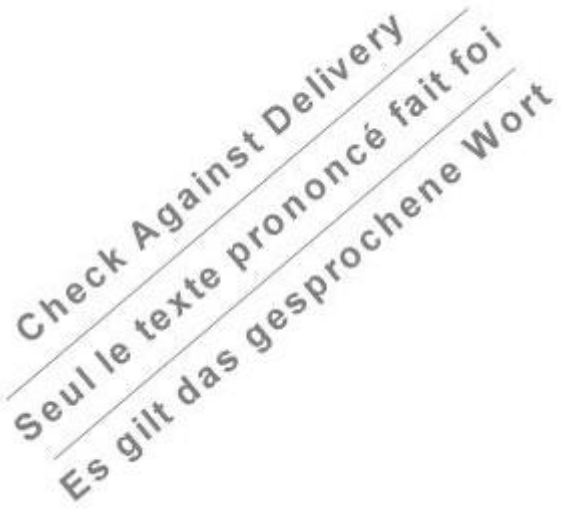
SPEECH/11/661

Catherine Ashton

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

Statement on the situation in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain



European Parliament

Bruxelles, 12 octobre 2011

Mr President, Honourable Members

Its only two weeks ago that in Strasbourg we discussed the situation in the Southern Neighbourhood and we felt that sense of impatience and uncertainty and that real change does take time and we know that will be measured in years and not in seasons. But we also recognize the importance of our continuing support and tonight we will focus on Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain – where Mr. President the latest events remind us of what we were saying two weeks ago.

Let me begin with Egypt and start by being absolutely clear that what we saw in Egypt on Sunday night was totally unacceptable - we were all shocked and appalled by the violence against a peaceful demonstration by the Coptic Christian community that lead to the death of 25 people with more than 300 people injured.

These clashes run contrary to the whole spirit and goal of the revolution and the aspirations of all the Egyptians – of all backgrounds and beliefs – they stood side by side asking for legitimate human rights after 30 years of authoritarian rule. The Egyptian uprising Mr President belongs to the whole population of Egypt. Protection of human rights is essential. I believe is the only way to ensure that we are going to have true democracy.

I made a statement calling for calm and restraint and an investigation so that those responsible for the violence can be brought to justice. I urged and I urge the authorities to protect the right to demonstrate peacefully, and the right to freedom of religion or belief – one of the most fundamental of all human rights.

Yet, the worst now would be for these tragic events to stand in the way towards democracy. On the contrary we have to learn this lesson fast. Sunday's events should encourage the government and the ruling military council to investigate, to listen, to review the emergency law and to step up the dialogue with political representatives ahead of elections.

Our Delegation Mr President met today with representatives from the Al Azhar University and Mosque – who can play a very important role in the dialogue between different communities.

As we have said before in this house Egypt faces its first opportunity to hold free and fair elections. And we will work to help the judges and the poll workers in the management of the upcoming parliamentary elections later this year.

And we will continue work both on the process towards democracy and in the relaunching of the economy, looking at the example of the Task Force in Tunisia last week, where we were able to bring together the international community, the European Institutions, Members of this House, the Member States, European Investment Bank, the EBRD, multilateral financial institutions, and crucially, private sector companies: making sure that together we become a catalyst for quicker and more effective assistance, in this case in Tunisia, but of course importantly right across the region.

Mr President, we were able to pull together a package of €4 billion over 3 years for Tunisia. We plan to do the same in other countries in the region where that collaborative approach can male a significant difference to the economic opportunities in those countries: Jordan, Egypt and other countries too.

I hope too that we will be able to do something for Syria in the near future, where the situation remains totally unacceptable, and where we must continue pressure on the regime – bilaterally and internationally. You have noted our sanctions and their gradual expansion to include oil exports – even now additional sanctions are under preparation. You have also seen our efforts in the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council. Member States have worked hard in the UNSC to try to get a resolution but were unable to achieve that. We must redouble our efforts. I will be raising our concerns with our strategic partners; US and China in the coming days.

There is no sign of the regime abandoning violence and repression. The risk of spiraling violence and sectarian rifts are very real. The recent incidents of targeted killings confirm this danger.

That is why the unity of the people and new political leaders on the ground is essential. We welcome all efforts to come together by the Syrian opposition. The creation of the Syrian National Council is encouraging. Inclusiveness, commitment to non-violence, human rights and democratic values is essential in that process. The European Parliament is unique in what it can offer to promote these values and well placed to offer a forum of dialogue. We should also seek to associate Arab countries in all our efforts.

We will remain steadfast and determined to support the people of Syria. Our sanctions are not directed against them but against the regime and those supporting it. We continue to send a message to the people of Syria that we will help them achieve their aspirations and will mobilize our assistance and improve our trade and economic links as soon as we see that genuine transition begins.

In Yemen, we wait and watch President Saleh who has talked again about transferring power, but I am not convinced he is listening to his people. This time surely he must match words with deeds and transfer power now. The time for empty promises is gone. The President and his family must stop holding the country's future to ransom.

Not least when we look at the tragedy of the humanitarian situation. There is a lack of fuel, power, food and water – and people face chronic malnutrition. Even before the current crisis, 7.5 million people - one third of all Yemenis - did not have enough to eat. 400,000 Yemenis are internally displaced, and the country hosts over 200,000 refugees from the Horn of Africa.

How exactly that transition goes forward is for the Yemeni parties themselves to work out. But they have long accepted the principles of the Gulf Cooperation Council's initiative.

We have engaged at all levels trying to facilitate peaceful solutions among the key players in Yemen; I have been closely with the GCC and the US to keep a strong and united front, sequencing and coordinating our messages and actions on the ground and in our capitals. We have played a key role through the UN Human Rights Council, and will now step it up through our Member States in the UN Security Council.

Last week a 32 year old Yemeni woman, Tawakkul Karman, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Her first meeting with the international community was hosted by our head of delegation on Sunday. He transmitted first hand my message that the prize recognises her relentless commitment to human rights, and particularly to women's rights. Mr. President women are at the forefront of the fight against repressive regimes and they must remain central to the shaping the reforms that follow.

Fourth and finally, Bahrain, where we have been watching the situation closely and we have made clear our views in statements and in direct talks with the Foreign Minister and the King. The Bahrain Ambassador was called again this morning to my services. We have adopted conclusions in the FAC several times. We will not do other than continue to put the situation in the forefront of our work and of our statements.

Like many amongst you - I have spoken out against the death penalty and the harsh sentences handed down in cases connected to the recent unrest. Special courts should not be used for trying civilians. I have urged Bahrain to stick to the commitments it has made, and to guarantee fair trials.

For that reason I have taken positive note of last week's decision to retry in civil courts the trials against doctors and nurses accused of tending to the medical needs of those who oppose the regime. Our request was heard, but now surely civilian courts should drop all charges.

This decision should be extended to all civilians tried in the Security Courts. About 60 more civilians, aside from those medical people, have been sentenced in these courts.

At the end of this month, the international Commission investigating the human rights violations will deliver its report. All the documented allegations must be followed up properly – whoever the presumed perpetrator is.

Our Members have also led the way in Geneva to try to secure follow up to the Independent Commission's findings in the Human Rights Council, and to allow the High Commissioner's Office to visit. On both fronts, the Bahraini authorities have chosen to remain evasive.

The investigations should change the Bahraini political climate and should encourage reconciliation. There needs to be far more – and better dialogue between the authorities and the opposition. Authorities should inject confidence in this process so that those groups with legitimate grievances can come to the table.

Without dialogue, real dialogue and real reforms, there can be no long-term, sustainable solutions to the challenges facing Bahrain.