EUROPEAN UNION

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Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton upon arrival at the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 23 July 2012[1]

It's a very busy Foreign Affairs Council this morning.

Let me begin by expressing my deepest sympathy to the victims of the terrorist attack in Bulgaria. We will hear from the Bulgarian Foreign Minister when he arrives about the latest situation there.

Of course dominating the agenda will be Syria. A terrible situation is evolving there and we have great concern for the people of Syria.

We will be continuing with our sanctions. You will see that we've introduced the new ability to be able to stop and examine what is actually being sent to Syria, to examine the cargo in ships and aircraft. I hope that will be really effective. It is important to carry on with sanctions, and it is very important to carry on with the political process.

As you know, we have been absolutely determined in our support for all the efforts that Kofi Annan has been making in what is an increasingly difficult situation. I was glad to see that the mission has been given an additional 30 days for the UN to continue trying to do something on the ground.

I was in the meetings in Geneva and then at the Friends of Syria meeting in Paris, I talked with my Russian and Chinese counterparts recently. I think what's very clear is that we have to continue the pressure on Syria, we have to continue to be very clear in our belief that President Assad has to step aside, that he needs to now consider the future for the Syrian people and consider how best they can have the kind of future that we believe is right for Syria, and that's a future of democracy and freedom.

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1 Check against delivery

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We want to appeal again to the opposition groups to come together more closely, to work together as effectively as they can, to provide the platform for transition, and for there to be the end of violence. That requires a concerted effort for everyone to send the same messages and to be absolutely determined.

The violence has to stop and in so doing we also have to work closely to look after the people who are escaping and fleeing from the terrible situation in Syria. We are doing this work together with the countries in the neighbouring region, especially those countries who are now having large numbers of refugees coming over the border: Turkey and Lebanon, and Jordan and Iraq.

We will also be thinking about the other countries of the Southern Neighbourhood. In particular we will look at the elections in Libya - I was very pleased that 16.5% of women have been elected so far in the party elections.

And I will be reporting on my successful meeting with President Morsi in Egypt at the end of last week. I was very impressed by what he said: that he believed in democracy, that he wanted to see the future of his country and we will continue to work with him on that basis and work with the people of Egypt for a successful future; we talked about how the EU can support Egypt both politically and economically in the future. I was also very pleased to participate in the Women's Conference in Egypt where we were offered 4 million euros in additional support for women; our support for the women of Egypt is absolutely clear. We believe that they are 50% of the population not just in name but also in talent and in ability. And when I have said to president Morsi that I thought it was important to be inclusive of all people: women, religious groups and so on, he was very clear that this was what he would wish to see as well.

In Cairo last week I was also happy to meet Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Araby to discuss the situation in Syria. The Arab League are debating a number of different options and we'll all have to wait and see what comes out of the latest deliberation. We've worked really closely with the Arab League throughout, it is important to recognize the important role that they have to play in this, and the EU and the Arab League along with other regional organizations have done a lot and will continue to do a lot, because once this is over there is going to be an awful lot to do to make sure that Syria can develop and grow properly.

We'll be talking too about Africa: the situation in the Sahel, our concerns about what's happening in the North of Mali, the efforts that we are putting into our mission in Niger and to continue with the comprehensive approach to try to support the people of the Sahel in very difficult circumstances.

We will discuss Somalia too, as we move towards the end of the transitional period on 20th August. We will underline our comprehensive approach on the Horn of Africa, the work that we're doing with both Atalanta to support shipping, to support the World Food Programme and continue my work to support people on the ground and to hope to see Somalia move forward.

And I'm very pleased that we've been able to reach an agreement on Zimbabwe. That's very important for me, and I was delighted to see that the UK was able to join in with that and I thank them for that.

The situation in Sudan and South Sudan is also extremely difficult and I am very worried about what is happening in the regions of Khordofan and Blue Nile and the continuing violence. We have begun to see is the prospect of the two leaders getting together: I hope that we will see a second meeting and I hope they continue to try working together because I am worried about not only the economy in the south but the economy in the north and of course the need to make sure that the fighting especially on the borders stops.

And then later on this afternoon the countries of the Eastern Partnership will join us for our Ministerial Meeting which is an opportunity to look at progress being made with them in the road map that we've established in Warsaw.