Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Ministers to discuss Iran & Syria in Brussels

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In a written statement to Parliament announcing the agenda for the meeting the Minister for Europe David Lidington said:

Foreign Affairs Council (FAC)

The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, will chair the Foreign Affairs Council on 23 January.

Iran

As agreed at the December 2011 FAC, Ministers should be presented with a package to expand and strengthen EU sanctions against Iran, including an oil embargo and further restrictions on finance, petrochemicals and gold. If agreed, these measures will reflect the degree of EU concern about the continued development of the Iran's nuclear programme. These robust measures aim to reduce Iran's ability to fund its nuclear programme and to encourage it to resume serious and meaningful negotiations.

Syria

In response to the continuing repression, we are pushing to agree strong Conclusions on Syria and a further round of EU sanctions. The UK has proposed an additional list of 21 military and security officials we believe are responsible for the violence against civilians. We are also working with partners to agree further sanctions at the February FAC.

Burma

Ministers will discuss recent developments in Burma, including the release last week of a significant number of political prisoners, and how the EU can best support the Burmese government in continuing on its path of reform. We expect Conclusions to be adopted welcoming the recent positive developments; and making clear that the EU will respond substantively if further progress is made in key areas, including free and fair by-elections on 1 April, and further steps towards resolving the ethnic conflict.

On 13 December the Foreign Secretary said:

“I am delighted to hear that a significant number of political prisoners in Burma have today been released, including 88 Generation and ethnic leaders.”

“The release of all political prisoners is a long-standing demand of the international community and I warmly welcome these releases as a further demonstration of the Burmese government’s commitment to reform.

“This is exactly the kind of measure I called for in all my meetings with Burmese government leaders last week. So is this week’s much needed ceasefire in the conflict with the Karen people. I hope these positive steps will contribute to greater democratic participation in the upcoming Parliamentary by-elections.”

Speaking on 12 January, the Foreign Secretary welcomed the ceasefire between the Burmese government and Karen National Union:

“I welcome the reports that the Burmese government and Karen National Union have signed a ceasefire after 63 years of fighting. This is good news for the people of Burma. It has been a longstanding goal of the international community to see a ceasefire, and indeed it was one of the key issues on which I urged the Burmese government to make progress during my visit last week when I also met with Karen representatives. There is still a long way to go fully to rebuild trust between the parties after so many years of conflict, but this is an important step in the right direction.”

Middle East Peace Process

Ministers are likely to receive a report from Baroness Ashton on the talks in Amman between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, which Quartet representatives also attended.

We also hope to agree Conclusions which welcome the direct talks facilitated by the Jordanians as part of the Quartet process; encourage both parties to present comprehensive proposals on territory and security as called for in the Quartet statement; and urge both parties to refrain from actions which might damage the prospects of a two state solution.

Egypt

We expect discussions to focus on the completion of elections to the Lower House and the first sitting due on 23 January. We will urge EU partners to maintain a high level of ambition on the EU offer, and to ensure that it is communicated effectively; and to push the Egyptians on the central role that civil society has to play in the transition process. Although there are unlikely to be Conclusions at this FAC, we expect there to be some in February reporting on progress on the transition.

Sudan/South Sudan

The discussion is likely to focus on the unresolved issues and tension between the two countries following secession of South Sudan in July 2011. Additionally, Ministers may review the ongoing conflicts and lack of humanitarian access in Southern Kordofan, Blue Nile, Abyei and Darfur, and the recent violence in Jonglei, South Sudan. We expect the adoption of the first formal Conclusions since South Sudan's secession, which we believe should mark the progress that secession represents, while setting out the EU's concern at the ongoing conflict, human rights abuses and weak governance in both countries.

Serbia/Kosovo

Baroness Ashton is expected to brief Ministers on progress in the EU-facilitated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. A decision on Serbia's EU candidate status will be taken at the February GAC; so any ensuing discussion at this FAC will probably focus on Serbian progress towards meeting the necessary conditions on Kosovo as specified by the December European Council. We welcome the progress made over the Christmas period, with Serbia and Kosovo implementing the dialogue agreement on freedom of movement. But we believe there is still more for Serbia to do to meet fully the European Council's requirements before the February GAC, particularly on Kosovan representation in regional fora.

belarus

We expect Ministers to agree an expansion of the designation criteria for exiting EU sanctions against belarus. Formal Conclusions may also be agreed, and Ministers may discuss the political and human rights situation in belarus.

Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) / Horn of Africa

Although CSDP / Horn of Africa is not a formal agenda item, Ministers may be asked to agree Conclusions reaffirming their commitment to launch the regional maritime capacity building (RMCB) mission to the Horn of Africa - as agreed by Ministers at the FAC on 1 December. The mission will help to strengthen the counter piracy efforts of local actors. We are keen to see the RMCB make a tangible difference on the ground, and to ensure that the EU Operations Centre best co-ordinates military support to this predominantly civilian mission and ensures coherence with existing EU missions in the region.

Religious Freedom

Although not a formal agenda item, we expect Italy to raise freedom of religion following recent violence against places of worship in Nigeria. On 25 December, the Foreign Secretary said:

"I condemn today's bomb attacks in or near churches in Nigeria. These are cowardly attacks on families gathered in peace and prayer to celebrate a day which symbolises harmony and

goodwill towards others. I offer my condolences to the bereaved and injured.”

General Affairs Council (GAC)

The General Affairs Council will take place on 27 January and will be chaired by the new Danish EU Presidency.

Before the official programme of the General Affairs Council, Herman van Rompuy will present, over breakfast, the latest situation with the Intergovernmental Treaty.

There are two main items on the GAC agenda in January. The first is European Council: follow-up to the December Council and preparation for January’s informal Council on growth the following week (30 January).

Read the Conclusions of the December European Council meeting

The second substantive item is the Multiannual Financial Framework, where there will be a stock-take of progress made in technical working groups. The Danish Presidency will explain how they plan to organise this negotiation under their chairmanship.

There will also be an update on recent decisions taken by the European Parliament and a presentation of the Danish Presidency work plan.

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