REMARKS

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton upon arrival at the Gymnich, Vilnius, 6 September 2013

"Can I first of all say to our host, Lithuania, thank you so much for the incredible efforts that you’ve made, with the Interparliamentary Conference, with the informal Defence Ministers meeting which has just concluded and now as we look forward to the Gymnich.

On our agenda today we’ll begin by also looking at the defence and security issues that are important as we think about the European Council in December, in response to the request of December 2012 to come up with proposals and ideas for taking forward our work in CSDP. Over lunch, we will debate that from a foreign ministerial perspective so that we’re able to move forward from my interim report to the final report to European leaders.

We will of course think very much about our neighbourhood. We’ll be coming back to Vilnius for the Summit of the Eastern Partnership, an incredibly important relationship with our 6 neighbouring countries to the East. I’m sure that Linas who will be our host again and who plays such an important role along with President Grybauskaitė in supporting the Eastern Partnership will have a great contribution to make in that discussion. It is an extremely important part of our neighbourhood.

I imagine that the great focus on the Southern Neighbourhood and Syria will figure large in the debate we have later on today, where Ministers will be able to reflect on some of the ideas coming out from the G20, where we stay closely in touch through both Presidents of the European Union who are present.
We are very mindful of the debate that is going on in St. Petersburg. And I think there are 3 or 4 key elements that we just need to keep in mind when the international community stands together. The first is in our condemnation of the use of chemical weapons. In all my discussions with many countries across the world and within the EU no one is suggesting that this wasn’t a chemical attack.

Secondly, the importance of the United Nations. We always look to the Security Council but we also look to the leadership of Ban Ki-Moon and Lakhdar Brahimi, who has been given a very challenging role in trying to move forward to the third and most important part, that the end of this conflict must be achieved by diplomatic and political means. There is so much energy that goes on every single day to try and reach out to those who can make the difference, come together and try and stop the terrible killing, the terrible plight of people in Syria. And I always think especially of children who are displaced, killed, injured, orphaned and who suffer terribly in this present situation.

In discussions about Syria this week with representatives from the Gulf States and from elsewhere that is the constant message I give. We have got to get to the point where people sit around the table and we have got to use all the political pressure we possibly can to get that to happen as soon as possible. That cannot be a long-term objective. It must be an objective that we reach now.

We will also consider this when Secretary Kerry arrives tomorrow - he’s arriving at the Gymnich at his request both to talk to us about his amazing work on the Middle East Peace Process, and I pay tribute to him again for that, but undoubtedly too to talk about Syria. Of course the question of what may happen in these next days and weeks in terms of the United States will be part of our discussion and that’s why Secretary Kerry’s visit to us is even more timely.

I have spoken to the Foreign Minister of Iran this morning. It’s the third time I have spoken to him in the last few weeks on a range of issues, but today specifically I was responding to the news that the foreign ministry will take responsibility for the talks. I told him that I stand ready with my colleagues to get the talks moving. We have dates that are available and he and I agreed to meet early in the week of the UN General Assembly in order to try and move this forward. It remains an extremely important part of my agenda.

I said to the Foreign Minister that I was encouraged to hear that we know where the interlocutor will be from. I don’t yet know who the interlocutor will be. And that’s an issue that I want to talk with the Foreign Minister about. He and I already established a rapport. He will play an important role in the relationship between the EU and Iran. But it remains to be seen quite how the decisions are taken about exactly what the formulation will be for the talks itself. I said to him that we are ready to come very quickly to discussions. And I hope that when we meet in New York, we will have the opportunity to set dates there and then. I can tell you that my colleagues in the E3+3 are ready and willing to do so. We’ve got some good proposals on the table. We are always willing to listen to good proposals from Iran. We really want to move now quickly to resolve this.
I have indeed discussed Syria with the Iranian Foreign Minister, who asked to speak to me not long after the day of the chemical weapons attack and I took the call and discussed with him. Of course they take a different view about where all this came from but I don’t believe they dispute the fact of the attack. I’ve made the point to him that I made to everyone: we have to get a political process that is going to solve this.”