OPENING REMARKS

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton

at the meeting of AFET Committee, European Parliament

"Thank you very much Mr President.

I know that for many of you these are the last couple of days before the holidays begin so if I may wish you all a Happy Christmas and the chance to have a break.

I want to begin by giving you a debrief from the Foreign Affairs Council that took place on 16 December here in Brussels. I'll cover a number of issues, not everything, because I want to devote as much time as possible to answering your questions and to entering into a discussion with you, but I'll cover the core issues.

We began the Foreign Affairs Council in restricted session, where I was able to debrief Ministers on the outcome of the Iran talks. I've been engaged in these talks for over three years. You will have seen that we were able between the 20th and 24th November to conclude a Joint Plan of Action, which really does represent a first step towards a long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful. It covers reciprocal measures by Iran concerning its activities and by the E3/EU+3 on restrictive measures. I believe that the Geneva agreement was indeed a significant diplomatic breakthrough.
What we now need to get on with is the implementation. I met yesterday with the Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Araghchi, who has been a key partner in the talks. And you will see that the technical level talks that stopped last week are starting again on Thursday of this week. He and I also discussed, as I have been doing with Minister Zarif over these last weeks, how once we move to implementation we move forward to start negotiations on what I hope will be a comprehensive solution. You will all appreciate the sensitivity of this diplomatic process. All I will say to you is that I remain personally committed and committed on behalf of the EU to get this job done, if it can be done.

We also looked, because of the General Affairs Council the next day, at foreign policy aspects of the Enlargement package. I sent a letter to Foreign Ministers that set out the results of the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue. It was a real pleasure for me to be part of this extraordinary process; and last Friday when we met was already the 20th Dialogue meeting. Some of these meetings have lasted for over fourteen hours in one stretch. All of them have lasted for several hours. The results of the work that has been done are there for everyone to see. They sometimes have exceeded my expectations, for example in the case of local elections in northern Kosovo. And that allows me to thank Roberto Gualtieri for his brilliant job in leading the Electoral Observation Mission there in extraordinary circumstances and I do thank you very much.

The next day at the General Affairs Council we were able to adopt the Negotiating Framework for Serbia and agreed to hold the Intergovernmental Conference that launches the accession negotiations in January 2014. I expect tomorrow’s European Council to confirm that decision. We think the opening of these accession negotiations is not just an important message for Serbia, it’s really important for the whole region. I also hope that SAA negotiations with Kosovo will be concluded in the course of the next year. I think that both Kosovo and Serbia are a model that should inspire the rest of the Western Balkans to deal with outstanding problems and to move forward. And there is no question of the importance of the European Union in helping to inspire the Prime Ministers, Presidents and their teams to actually make this agreement.

On Albania the Council decided to give a positive signal recognizing the progress that’s been achieved and agreed Conclusions that look forward to a decision regarding granting candidate status in June of 2014 on the basis of a Commission report. That’s also a signal that goes beyond Albania and contributes to regional stability.

Not surprisingly at FAC we spent some considerable time discussing and assessing the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius which had concrete and substantive results, particularly in initialising the Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova, with a view to signature next year. Both will need our increased support after Vilnius.

But inevitably the developments in Ukraine were very high on our agenda. As you all know, I was in Kyiv last week. I met with President Yanukovych twice. I met with the opposition leaders twice, with civil society, with the three former presidents and I spent some time in Maidan. Ministers confirmed again at the Foreign Affairs Council the readiness to sign the Association Agreement with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area part as soon as Ukraine is ready and the conditions are met. I need not say to anyone here that we believe
that this Agreement is the best way to address the short term economic challenges and pave the way for the long term economic future of Ukraine. Apart from anything else it would send a real signal to international markets and to financial institutions that would I believe would give confidence. And it gives a blueprint for economic and political reforms. Ministers welcomed the public support for the political association and economic integration with the European Union by so many in Ukraine, as was demonstrated yet again last weekend and throughout the week.

In both of my meeting with President Yanukovych he reconfirmed his desire to sign this agreement and he and I discussed in detail all of the economic challenges that economy in Ukraine faces. We stand ready of course to engage and assist in finding a way through the current political stalemate and assisting in dialogue. Yesterday I received a letter from three opposition leaders setting out their ideas and we’ve made it clear that either myself or others in the European Union would be more than willing to assist in support of that dialogue if that would be of value. So I would say to the authorities in Ukraine that we need to ensure that citizens do continue to have the right of assembly and of expression, that we need to stop any suggestion of violence, that there has to be an adequate investigation into the violence that has taken place and there has to be the release of the detained demonstrators. And there needs to be a solution to this political crisis in order that the country can move forward.

We talked about our Southern Neighbourhood and I’ll focus particularly on Syria because our minds are turning to two aspects of this crisis. The first is the terrible humanitarian situation. Kristalina Georgieva has had meetings here today with many of the UN agencies and we know only too well that the enormous appeal that has been set up by the UN is but one part of what’s going to be necessary to support people who are going through the worst possible time, not only in Syria but also in the surrounding countries and of course in EU Member States where numbers of people are increasingly looking for support and to be able to seek asylum.

The other aspect of our work is of course looking to Geneva II. Pierre Vimont has just come back from meeting with Lakhdar Brahimi and discussing with him the prospects for Geneva II and the possibility of this being the beginning of a process. We are very keen to promote a role for civil society and we are particularly concerned that women must be represented in the delegations that take part in the Geneva II talks. I know that Pierre has raised this directly with Lakhdar Brahimi who agrees this is going to be important and we need to find ways in the EU to support women to be able to be present in Geneva, not on the sidelines but as part of the core discussions. So we need to do as much as we possibly can to continue the regional cooperation, to work to support the diplomatic efforts, to ensure that we continue our own diplomatic contacts not just with people in Syria but outside and also across the whole region where the solution surely lies in terms of bringing everybody together.

We also looked at the contribution to the destruction of chemical weapons, this work is going well, and a number of Member States have made very welcome offers in terms of logistical support. We will also give a contribution to the OPCW to finance the last phase of its destruction programme.
I want to also mention the situation in the Central African Republic which I would describe as alarming. We know that we need to make sure that we’re acting decisively. We’ve been in close collaboration with France and we welcome very much their intervention. We’ve given €50 million in support of the work that’s going on there and we’re providing considerable humanitarian assistance. We announced a further €18.5 million on Monday. We have to do more to try and address the crisis and help people right across the country. This will be a subject to be discussed at the European Council but it’s also a subject that we’re discussing closely with our African partners to ensure more rapid responses to such crises.

I should say as I think about what’s happening in Africa, that my mind is very much on the situation in South Sudan at the present time, and the situation in Juba and beyond where we are working closely with our Delegation and today there was a Crisis Platform meeting again to examine what more we can do there.

And then finally, Mr President, amongst other things that we discussed I just want to mention the Myanmar/Burma Task Force which we debriefed on at the end of the meeting. I want to thank European Parliamentarians for the incredible work and support they gave to what was a very successful two days in Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw, working closely with President Thein Sein and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi which I think was highly valued by all the people of Myanmar/Burma.

Thank you very much."