by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
upon arrival at the Foreign Affairs Council

Good morning everyone. The Foreign Affairs Council will be having a number of important discussions today. We'll be talking about the current situation in Ukraine. I was there last week to have the chance to talk at length with President Yanukovych - who assured me he wishes still to sign the association agreement - but also to have the chance to meet with civil society, opposition leaders, and to talk to people who have gathered in Maidan square.

What I said to President Yanukovych is that Ukraine is a sovereign country, and they must make the best decision possible. We have spent years in negotiating what we know is a good agreement. In trade terms, it will have a positive impact on their economy, in terms of stability and looking forward it will give them the chance to develop their investment in areas like agriculture and energy. It will have a beneficial effect because it will also provide additional support to the economies of other countries in the region.

So we are very concerned when we look at some of the things that have been said and my purpose in talking to President Yanukovych was to discover what the short term economic issues are that have prevented him from signing. I feel that we can work with him to resolve those: some of them can be handled through the support of the European Union, others through financial institutions, some of them from the private sector, but all of them are possible.

We will also be joined at lunch time by the Foreign Minister of Russia, who comes to talk about the relationship that we have, not just bilaterally in terms of the issues
that we are dealing with, but also the collaboration we have, for example on Iran where we work very closely with our Russian counterparts.

I will of course be debriefing Ministers on Iran and the current state of play. The technical talks will begin again. You know we sorted out most of the details but inevitably there are one or two areas where we need to think very carefully about how the implementation is going to work. Getting the agreement is one thing, implementing it is where the experts need to do their work. So the Iranian team went back for some consultations but I've been in touch with the Foreign Minister, the Iranians are in touch with us, and I'm expecting them to start working again very soon.

We'll talk as well about Syria, the continuing and ongoing crisis, looking forward to what could happen on January 22nd at Geneva II conference, but also looking at the humanitarian crisis that is extremely serious. We think of all the people internally and in the surrounding countries who are going to suffer more because it's winter time and whose lives are being totally destroyed by what's happened in the country.

We've been very clear for two years that we need a political process to be able to resolve what is happening in Syria. You need to find a way to stop the fighting, so that people stop dying or being injured. You need to get food and supplies out to people, and you need to find a plan, a road map, a way out that can be signed up by the people in the country. And on all those issues, that's where the European Union stands together and that's what we will push in Geneva II.

We have done everything we can to provide the sort of support that is going to be necessary for the people. That's primarily humanitarian support. I'm very proud that the European Union and its Member States are the biggest donors; I wish we didn't have to be but I'm very proud that we are.

But the political process that needs to happen is something that for the last years we have consistently said has got to be a priority. I appreciate very much the work of Lakhdar Brahimi who's had an incredibly difficult job. But now that we've got a date, the most important thing is to get people there and to get an agreement to stop fighting and an agreement to get aid properly through to people, and an agreement to find ways to rebuild this country.

We'll also talk about the Central African Republic where the crisis is unfolding. We've given 50 million euros to support the effort that is going on in Central African Republic but it will be an opportunity to talk about our relationship with CAR more broadly. We're also thinking of the major summit we'll have with the African Union early next year.

It will be for member states to make the decision about how they want to use their resources in support of some of the challenges that we face, particularly when it comes to Africa. I think there is more that we need to do in support of what the African Union and what African leaders are looking for. And that means thinking carefully about how we give our support. I was talking with Laurent Fabius last night and he will today be talking about the crisis in Central African Republic. What I'm very clear about is we need to be able to respond effectively and we need to think about how to do that.
I think the challenges that are faced by Iraq are extremely difficult at the present time. I've been speaking especially with the UN Special Representative, Nikolay Mladenov, about the situation there. He is very engaged and working very closely with us on trying to support stability in the country and trying to move forward, not just in the situation that is unfolding in Baghdad but all across the country. So we'll continue to engage very fully with Iraq.

With Egypt, we have seen the end of the work of the 50 and Amr Moussa and his team have worked hard to try and find a way forward for a constitution that they believe will give Egypt the best chance of moving forward with a democratic framework. What we now have to do is to look at the situation of how we support the referendum. I've heard some dates that I think are being finalized now for mid-January. That will be the next step. The sooner and the faster that Egypt can get back to real democracy and find ways of ensuring that the economy can grow as well, the better that will be for the Egyptian people.