REMARKS

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

"Good morning. Let me say at the beginning that this is an important day in our pursuit of ensuring that Iran has an exclusively peaceful nuclear programme. The IAEA will be putting forward a report in the next few hours. You know that I was mandated in December by Foreign Ministers to put forward a proposal today to suspend some EU sanctions in line with the Joint Plan of Action from Geneva, and there will be more information on all of that later on. We already gave indications of exactly what we'll do in the Joint Plan of Action and I'll be putting forward a proposal to Ministers today based on that.

Depending on how things go today we'll be looking to the process to reach a comprehensive agreement with Iran, so that will be the next step. I hope that we will start talks within the next few weeks. I'll be discussing with my colleagues from the E3+3 in the next couple of days and also talking with Iran and then we will be able to give an answer.

Our thoughts today, especially, are with the Danish and British personnel who were killed in Afghanistan, in Kabul. We have a big discussion on Afghanistan today but I'm sure that everyone's thoughts will be with their families and friends. It's always incredible to me when, even faced with such tragedy, our delegations, missions and our people in the country they're working in are so determined to continue to help and support, in this case the people of Afghanistan into the future. Our thoughts are with them.
We'll be thinking too about Syria. We will have Geneva II Conference later this week. I will be there for the European Union. We wish Lakhdar Brahimi every possible success in his efforts, not just in convening this meeting but in fact what happens afterwards, on the 24th when discussions begin between the different parties. It is really important for all the reasons that you've heard me saying many times before, that we continue our humanitarian support, that we look for the kind of confidence building measures of getting a ceasefire and getting support to people and to try and find a way through to peace. I've no doubt it will be difficult, I'm sure that we all want to support Lakhdar Brahimi and the UN in trying to do this.

We've had a very straightforward view on the participation at the conference. It is for the United Nations and Lakhdar Brahimi to decide who he needs in the room and he will have to weigh up the different elements of this and the way that people feel about the participation of different nations. As I've said, the most important part of all of this is what happens afterwards, when all of the speeches are finished and Lakhdar Brahimi gets down to work. I'll support him in what he does. The purpose of Geneva II is of course to endorse what we call Geneva I, the things that were said there, but to also give strength to Lakhdar Brahimi's work, to be able now to try and find a way through, building confidence, by whatever means he can, and securing a ceasefire, getting humanitarian aid in, and so on. But ultimately to try and find a peaceful solution.

We'll also be thinking about what's been happening in Egypt with the referendum, and you've seen that we've issued statements on that. A high percentage voted yes. There was a turn out I'd have liked to see even higher. I think the most important things remain: getting onto the roadmap now in terms of the elections and to try to be as inclusive as possible in terms of bringing all the Egyptian people who support democracy and who support the future of Egypt into the political framework. And that will be the continuous message. I've said that I congratulate the Egyptian people on being part of this referendum. The new constitution is an opportunity, with Amr Moussa's work and the people who've participated in that, to move forward. And that's what we want to see and I'm looking forward to visiting Egypt again to deliver those messages.

We'll also talk today about Russia and our relationship with Russia. We have the EU-Russia Summit coming up. It's very important in our bilateral relations, but also I think events in recent times particularly in the Eastern Partnership will be elements that Ministers will want to reflect on. I've been following very closely the events in Ukraine over the last few days. I see that President Yanukovitch is going to be talking today with opposition leaders, I hope that is a positive move forward.

Other issues will include the Central African Republic. We want to now consider future developments. We've been as you know working closely with Laurent Fabius; I had discussions about this at the European Council when President Hollande talked about the mission that France is undertaking, and there's been a lot of discussion in the last week on the basis of the paper that we've put forward to look at what we might do. So I'm hoping that Ministers today will be ready to decide on the way forward. And I pay tribute to France for the work that it has been doing in difficult circumstances."