Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the end of the Informal Meeting of Defence Ministers in Budapest

Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, made today the following remarks:

"I want to begin by thanking the Hungarian Minister of Defence, Csaba Hende, and thanking Hungary for hosting this event. I'll be back again in a few weeks with the Foreign Ministers and it's a great pleasure to be here in Hungary and have the opportunity to have this press conference. I wanted to start by talking a little bit about the evolving situation in Libya.

Last night I updated the Defence Ministers on all of the latest work that is going on in Brussels, in coordination and in support of the Security Council and this morning both by video link and in our conversation with Secretary General Rasmussen we continued that process of updating the Defence Ministers.

Last night I spoke to the Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, and we reiterated our mutual concern for what's happening in Libya and I reiterated our support for the Security Council, which you know is meeting again today.

You'll have seen that yesterday with Minister Lavrov from the Russian Federation I issued a further joint statement about the situation in Libya among other aspects of what's happening in North Africa.

We were looking today in a broader contest of course of how we pull and coordinate resources and that's particularly pertinent for the work that is currently going on to ensure a proper evacuation of the EU citizens and I just want to take the opportunity to particularly thank France for putting at the disposal of the Monitoring and Information Center a ship that can help with the evacuation of EU citizens who are still currently in Libya.

You're very well aware of the difficult circumstances under which evacuation is taking place. It's our duty to make sure that we help to facilitate and coordinate the information from different member states to enable that to take place.

---

1 check against delivery
Figures vary: we know that there are over 2000 citizens still there. Some citizens are dual nationals that do not want to leave, the rest we're busy trying to make sure that the support is available to take them out as quickly as possible.

In parallel to that of course, we are looking at what the European Union should be doing, and the Political and Security Committee has been meeting to see what we can do to support the work that is also going on in the UN.

So we've been looking at the possibility of restrictive measures to try and put as much pressure as possible to stop the violence in Libya and to see the country move forward.

Again the range of different issues we are examining: travel ban, asset freeze which will be in discussion with New York as well as amongst the 27.

I have also been talking to the White House, I will be talking to Secretary Clinton later today, and I am meeting with her deputy tomorrow and with her again on Monday in Geneva for the Human Rights Council.

The three aspects of what we are doing:

First of all the evacuation; secondly the coordination of what the EU can do to put pressure on the situation in Libya to stop the violence and thirdly the collaboration internationally, particularly with the Security Council, to ensure that we have a coordinated approach.

We are looking to support also in a humanitarian way. We have got money that has gone into Red Cross on the ground. We do have people in the region, not yet in Libya for obvious reasons, but they are looking at the prospects of being able to do that in the near future and try to offer support to the UN agencies that are also at the borders at the present time. We have been in touch with the UN to coordinate all of that.

The other purpose of the meeting of Defence Ministers today was to continue the work that we have to do for the longer term in particular in two or three ways.

First of all, last night we talked about the missions that we have and especially focused on the mission form the coast off Somalia to try and combat piracy.

I described the situation as being one in which the pirates have become more professional; they have bigger boats, they have bigger guns, they are moving much further than I wish to see and the area of sea that we have to patrol gets bigger. The Atalanta mission, as the EU mission is called, works in collaboration with NATO, Russia, India, China, with many countries who are also trying to support the shipping and we are focused on ensuring the World Food Programme is able to deliver food to 12 million people and that is the clear and prime purpose of our work. But we also know the solution to piracy lies on land and not the sea. I am developing a Horn of Africa strategy which links to the work I did last year in helping to co-chair meetings with governments form across the region from those African nations and those African organizations most directly affected where they were developing a three part strategy.

First of all, to help combat piracy by deterrence, by prosecution and imprisonment.

Secondly by collaborating with each other to try and develop a more comprehensive strategy for development in Somalia and thirldly to increase their capacity to patrol their own waters.

So developing a comprehensive strategy is going to be part of the work that you will see coming out of the EAS in the next couple of weeks. But it is important to make sure this element of it is well understood and that the Commander was able to talk to the defence ministers.

I want to just mention a couple of other things as well.
A big part of the work that has been going on during the Hungarian Presidency and will continue through the rest of this year with the Polish presidency is to look at the issues we call pulling and sharing. The capacity to be able to make sure that, in a time of economic difficulty when budgets are being cut, we are smarter in how we use resources and we are more able to share and collaborate as appropriate, recognizing the sovereignty of defence but recognizing too that what we can share to be able to have greater impact. There are many discussions going on, there are initiatives that have already taken place but it is important that we do that and in that collaborative approach too we are also discussing with our obvious partner NATO on the back of the strategic concept which talks about the links between the EU and NATO to ensure that we are also developing our capabilities with them and with the United Nations.

Thank you"