Main remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton upon arrival at the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Libya and Southern Neighbourhood, Brussels, 10 March 2011

This is an important informal EU Foreign Ministers meeting, partly to help me prepare for tomorrow's European Council, where we will be discussing the joint paper prepared by the European Commission and myself as well as thinking about economic and political support for the region. We will also be discussing the issue that we are most focused on at the moment - what is happening in Libya.

As you all know, finding out what's happening requires us to put, as I did, a mission on the ground in Tripoli last weekend, a fact-finding mission, but also to talk to as many people as possible. The fact-finding mission talked with our ambassadors on the ground, the EU ambassadors, and with others to find out more.

And I have met two representatives of the National Transition Council in Strasbourg on Tuesday. They were there meeting the European Parliament. My purpose, as I explained to them, was to gather information. They talked about the situation as they saw it. They described their aspirations for Libya; we talked about the need for democracy, the need to engage with all people in Libyan society, with women and with the young people who have been so important across the region, and also to look at the future. It was a good and interesting meeting.

The really big message is to keep the political pressure on, to stop the violence and to move forward successfully in the transition of Libya to a democratic country. It is also important to ensure that we're able to give humanitarian support and are able to deal with the issues of people who are fleeing out of Libya on the borders.

You will know that – in order to keep up the pressure - we are considering the economic sanctions; that we are looking at what can be done.

In the UN Security Council, in NATO and amongst Member States there's been a discussion about what is the most effective way of trying to support the push for the end of violence. And I've no doubt that there will be discussions on issues and ideas like a no-fly zone.
The no-fly zone, I think, is a subject that the Security Council will need to take a view on, but it is also something that the NATO countries are considering. I think it's very important in anything that we do to be clear about what action we are taking and why, who is best placed to do what, but to keep the pressure on. And in everything I do I'm keeping in constant touch with the Arab League.

In terms of the region overall it is a combination of things that we are discussing with those countries, with Tunisia and with Egypt, with other countries. It is about economic support, about finding ways to collaborate with international partners to provide the right kind of economic support, bearing in mind what is happening in those countries.

It's also about the offer that we are making to give them political support to build their political parties, to get ready for elections and so on, but always with the proviso that these are their countries; they must lead and we will offer to help.

I will go from this meeting to the NATO defence ministers meeting, again in preparation for tomorrow. And after the European Council I will travel to the Informal Ministers meeting in Hungary. From there I will go directly to Cairo to meet with the Arab League who I am constantly in touch with as we consider what we are doing.

I had a delegation meeting with Amr Moussa at the beginning of this week so that we make sure that in everything we do we are absolutely clear - on the broader economic and political picture for the region - that this is for the Arab world to lead on in their economic and political future, and for us to be their to support, and that's critical to me.