Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the end of Foreign Affairs Council

"Today has been a day where the focus of the work of the FAC has been once again on the neighbourhood and we spent most of this morning discussing a range of issues and different countries of our neighbourhood to further develop the approach that we are taking.

And we do this against the backdrop of my having returned last night from a brief visit to Benghazi where we had the opportunity to meet with Transitional National Council and with people from civil society like women's groups, young people, people involved in the media. I was quite surprised to learn that 55 newspapers have started in Benghazi in the last three months; I have brought some examples if any of you are interested in seeing them.

We had our discussion against the backdrop of recognizing the changes that are happening in the neighbourhood and the importance of Europe being seen to support people in the neighbourhood, not just in the short term, but also in the medium and long term. This is the message I gave to the people of Benghazi. This is also the message we have been consistently giving to the people of the countries with whom we engage and to those countries moving through quite difficult times and transition.

We also focused today on recognizing that we need to apply pressure to regimes that are using violence to stifle the pro-democracy movements and the will of the people. We want to see people having dialogue with their governments - having dialogue for change.

Today we have added 10 names – including President Assad - to the list of those subject to sanctions in Syria. The names will be published in Official Journal of the EU tomorrow.

Our message is clear: Stop the violence now, respect human rights and embrace genuine and concrete reforms that people are asking for. Change course and respond to the needs and demands of the people.

On Iran, we have added a number of individuals and companies to the sanctions list. This is part of the efforts to ensure that our sanctions have been properly observed and that we are keeping up to date with the issues we have raised in the previous meetings.

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We have added one company and one individual to the Libyan sanctions list.

And following the recent trials of opposition politicians in Belarus we have added 13 to the sanctions list there.

We continue to use all the pressure that we can - of which using sanctions is but one tool - to try to keep pressure on those repressive regimes and to help those who are striving for a better future.

So we again urged the Bahraini authorities to engage in meaningful dialogue and reform, to ensure full respect for human rights and we deplored recent death sentences.

We were also very disappointed with the events in Yemen. President Saleh has repeatedly failed to sign the transition agreement on which we have cooperated very closely with our GCC partners.

President Saleh knows the commitment that he has made. Those of us who have spoken with him know that he knows the commitment that he has made. He should transfer power now and he should sign the agreement. So we continue to review our policies towards Yemen and prepare our response to what is happening there.

We also wanted to look at the needs of immediate and future demands of our Southern Neighbours with whom we have been working as they are building their future.

Tunisia and Egypt in particular are important, but also Morocco and Jordan. We have agreed on the importance of providing maximum support to these transitions. Not just short term, but for the medium and long term too. And you will see more of that in the next couple of days when we continue and complete our work on the neighbourhood strategy.

Those of you who have seen the debates in the EP will also know how important the issue of Camp Ashraf is.

Without questioning Iraq's sovereignty, we have emphasised the need to respect human rights. This was the first time that we have discussed this at the FAC, but I felt it was important that we address this. And we have agreed on the importance of working with the UN and US in particular, to seek a lasting resolution to those issues.

We also had a good and long discussion on the Middle East Peace Process.

As ever, it is a challenging moment. But as I have made it clear in my discussions with PM Netanyahu, President Abbas and in the US last week, it is also the moment of opportunity. I think it is more than ever the moment for negotiations to begin and I very much welcome what President Obama said in his speech last week.

I am also concerned about the announcements on new settlements, the 1,550 housing units in East Jerusalem. The EU, as you know, considers all settlement activities illegal under international law.

We have reaffirmed today our positions and parameters that we have adopted in previous conclusions.
I think that the legitimate security interests of Israel and the legitimate demands of the Palestinian people are best met by negotiated settlement, based on the parameters that are very familiar to you and to us. I really hope, both on behalf of the EU and as member of the Quartet, that we can start to see the resumption of those negotiations.

There will be a Quartet Envoys meeting this week, chaired by the EU to try and move this forward.

We have also pointed out that we have consistently called for reconciliation behind President Abbas and his work and in our conclusions today we have welcomed the agreement signed in Cairo, stating at the same time the need to uphold the principle of non-violence and previous agreements and obligations.

Finally, we have talked about the issues in our eastern neighbourhood which are extremely important to us.

Ministers welcomed the cancellation of the referendum in Republika Srpska, following my visit there 10 days ago.

We have also discussed developments in the South Caucasus and exchanged views on the situation in Nagorny Karabakh and talked about Georgia. We are very worried about the fatal incidents in Georgia last week and in Nagorny Karabakh over the weekend.

We talked about what is happening in Sudan: the continuing violence in Darfur, what has been happening in Abyei, and our concerns about both North and South Sudan moving forward within a Comprehensive Peace Agreement. And it is very important that there is now withdrawal of troops and there is a recognition the terms of that agreement needs to be fulfilled as the countries move forward and South Sudan looks forward to July.

We urge that steps are taken to secure the immediate release of the three Bulgarian hostages held in the region.

We continue to look to what is happening in Albania and you will see the efforts of our discussion on Belarus.

Finally, we had a discussion on the Human Rights Strategy which I will be presenting in June. I have described human rights as a silver thread that should run through everything that we do in our external relations.

I want to see us be more effective in how we take that strategy forward, how we ensure that is part of everything that we do and not just an add on to the work of the EEAS or indeed to the work that I and others undertake.

We will be shortly having the meeting of the defence ministers where we will be looking at the state of play on military operations, thinking especially about the Horn of Africa, BiH and the Southern Neighbourhood.

We will focus on the "pooling and sharing" capabilities in order to start looking for delivering concrete projects from the autumn.

And to round off what feels quite like a long day, I will chair the steering board of the EDA later on this evening."