Remarks by the High Representative Catherine Ashton ahead of the Foreign Affairs Council

Good morning everyone. It's the Foreign Affairs Council this morning, with a number of key issues on the agenda.

We'll be discussing the situation in Sudan and moves towards the formal birth of the new country of South Sudan in July and what we can do, in a comprehensive way, to support South Sudan into the future, but also focusing on the North too.

Secondly, I have just returned last night from the Middle East, so I will be debriefing ministers on my discussions with President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu to see what more we can do to try and get this process moving, bearing in mind that a lot of people are focused understandably on the UN General Assembly and on September.

I'll do everything I possibly can to try and help the process move forward.

My purpose is to try and find ways so that the parties can get back to the negotiating table.

On Syria, what is going to be interesting is what President Assad says this morning. That speech will be watched by all of us with great interest to see if it gives us anything to work with but we have made it clear all along that the violence is totally unacceptable and we have called many times for the violence to stop.

On Syria, I keep in touch with Ahmet Davutoglu on a regular basis so we should speak in the next day or so about the latest developments from his side. You'll have heard what the Turks have said, what he's been saying recently about the situation. At the EU-Russia summit, we had the opportunity to raise our concerns with President Medvedev about the importance of the Security Council which is now looking at this.

The situation of violence is extremely alarming and you'll see that all of us involved, all the international community, call on President Assad to stop the violence and for him to start listening to what people actually ask him to do.
On Libya, we have been doing a number of things. First of all, humanitarian aid. You know that we've been the largest donor of humanitarian aid and we've been helping people who need to leave the country. Some 55,000 people have been assisted so far.

Secondly, as you know, I opened an office in Benghazi and the purpose of that is to be a focal point to channel support. The people in Benghazi wanted to have support for a number of things, such as security sector reform and how do you make sure that the borders are managed properly.

The other issue was the building of democratic institutions. There are lots of conversations going on, especially with young people. It's also about freedom of the media. I think I've said it before that there are 55 newspapers that have started in Benghazi, so there is lots of interest in having free and open media there, and a lot of interest in how do you develop the infrastructure of life, how you move forward towards democracy.

The Cairo group met this weekend under UN leadership, with the African Union, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Arab League and the European Union. That was about looking to how we support the process beyond Gaddafi's departure into the dialogue that will need to take place, into the building of the constitution.

We will also be discussing Belarus this morning and we will continue to put pressure on Belarus to do what it needs to do.

We will also have the opportunity to talk with all of our colleagues from the Western Balkans in a strategic way. So the messages will be how important they are to the European Union, how much we want to see them go forward on reform.