Statement by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the
Annual Follow-up Meeting on the Declaration of Principles
for International Election Observation

Brussels, 4th October

"Thank you very much Mr. President, Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, former presidents of the European Parliament and colleagues and friends.

I think this is the first time the EU has hosted this event and I am delighted to be able to participate in it and extremely pleased to be amongst so many important people in terms of the work that they have done to promote democracy.

For the EU, we are founded of course on the core values of human rights and democracy and we believe it is right that people should as a principle be able to stand, to vote, and to have freedom of assembly, of association and of speech. Too often in the world, we are confronted with people who are unable to do those things, so when they are able to do so it is important that we support them.

I think Election Observation is a success story for the European Union. I was surprised when I looked at the figures to see that since the year 2000 we have observed almost 100 elections in 54 countries. Last year over 800 EU observers from all Member States staffed these missions.

Today, our EU election observation mission in Zambia is winding down, our mission in Tunisia is underway, and those for Nicaragua and the Democratic Republic of Congo are about to be deployed.
The Tunisian elections of 23 October, as you said Mr President, will be the first democratic elections in the region since the January revolutions began and it is crucial that we support this process. We have given technical assistance to the national commission in the run-up to the polls, and I met with them last week to discuss how we can provide further help.

And we have got an independent team of observers who have been in the country since mid-September.

We know that supporting stable, prosperous democratic countries is in our interests. And working with, for example, Tunisia is also about finding new ways of offering that support. Some colleagues from the EP joined me last week in the first Task Force meeting in Tunis chaired by myself and the Prime Minister of Tunisia. That was an important occasion because we brought together not only the EU and member states but also the international financial community and business in order to celebrate where Tunisia is heading and to offer continuous support to it.

The Election Observation Mission in Tunisia, led by MEP Michael Gahler, is already on the ground and doing good work.

In Egypt, where elections will start on November 28th, the EU will support domestic observers through training and capacity building. And working with civil society to make sure that they too are supported as a key motor for democracy.

As you know well, Mr President, election observation missions operate independently of all EU institutions. They act under the authority of a Chief Observer who is always a Member of the European Parliament, whom I appoint. I really value the collaboration and cooperation that we have with the European Parliament in these processes. I am delighted to see that we are engaging more women as chief observers and I am making sure that we have the spread from the political parties here.

But if I might, I would like to pay a personal tribute to the work that our chief observers and their teams do on the ground. Sometimes I get reports directly from the ground and I recognize how much work is going on and how much they do. But more importantly, I often get feedback afterwards from the countries that they have visited and without exception, even when things are difficult, it is recognised that they do a key piece of work. The importance of ensuring that these elections are monitored properly is something that the people, when I have the opportunity to talk with civil society in different countries, are so grateful for, not least the contribution made by parliamentarians in the EP.

I think, President Carter, that the Carter Center says that a key goal of our common work is developing standards for democratic elections. This is an important shared agenda. Our missions provide a technical assessment, for instance, on whether the criteria to participate in elections are genuinely open, on the degree to which media or public resources may be used and on the role of women in public life.
I know too that it takes good political judgment to comment on elections which see violence, and we have seen that, this year, in a number of countries. Our missions often can be drawn into very sensitive and complex situations and again I pay tribute to the sensitive handling that I have personally seen by those who lead our missions.

Just as important though is what happens afterwards and the recommendations which follow the elections, and our ability to follow up those recommendations. Many of these recommendations have been a key part of the push for electoral and legislative reform in the countries where we have worked. An obvious example is in Nigeria where the Independent Electoral Commission responded to our criticisms last time, and followed through with recommendations for reform. The same happened in Mexico, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and most recently in Mozambique.

Our task, Mr President, is to take forward the work from last year’s meeting at The Carter Center in Atlanta, to maximize the impact of our recommendations, and to make sure that we are providing real assistance and support for countries willing to address these issues.

Elections alone are not enough: they cannot bring peace, stability and prosperity by themselves. They are a vital step on the broader efforts to promote democracy and respect of human rights and to build "Deep" Democracy. Real democratic culture, strong democratic institutions, established status of political parties and an active role of civil society – those are the things that make democracy real and perhaps that is most obvious when we see governments voted out as well as governments voted in.

Thank you very much."