Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Luxembourg, 10 October 2011

We started this meeting with a discussion on developments in Ukraine and Belarus. Not surprisingly, ministers expressed great concern about the upcoming verdict on Yulia Tymoshenko.

We are not optimistic about this trial, our impression remains of what I would call a selective application of justice and we are following it closely.

We also discussed the fact that we are now in the final phase of our negotiations on the Association Agreement with Ukraine and we need to assess the impact of the verdict on that quite carefully.

In the case of Belarus, our policy is very clear and was reconfirmed by the ministers today. We renewed our restrictive measures for a year and added 16 new names to the travel ban and assets freeze list.

We are not at this stage ready to consider any renewed dialogue until we see the release and rehabilitation of all political prisoners.
There was a great commitment for the work that is going on with engaging civil society in Belarus. It is a very important part of our policy and I pay tribute to Stefan Füle in particular for the work that he is doing.

I really hope that what we have seen recently is a positive sign that the Belarusian authorities are now prepared to release and rehabilitate the rest of the prisoners in order that we can move forward and if they were to do that we would of course be able to engage.

We held quite a big discussion on our southern neighbourhood covering a range of different countries, different situations but with two common themes which I have explained at the beginning: the support that we give to the political process in each and the support we give to economic stability and growth in each.

On the latter, I was particularly pleased to inform ministers about the Tunisian Task Force which took place last week. You will know that was an event over two days co-chaired by the Prime Minister of Tunisia and myself at which the member states, the European institutions, the European Investment Bank, the EBRD, the World Bank, the Africa Bank and others came together with the private sector too to make sure that we are offering concerted support over the next few years. And we were able to pledge about 4 billion Euros to Tunisia for the next 3 years from those assorted sources, including the European Investment Bank and the Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

There is reason to be optimistic as we look at Tunisia, and member states today were keen to continue our support for Tunisia economically and politically as they move towards the elections.

We were concerned about the violence that happened yesterday and continues today in Egypt and I have already put out a statement on this. There is a unity amongst the 27 member states on the importance of protecting freedom of religion and belief. This is a universal human right and it needs to be protected everywhere and for everybody. We hope that the Egyptian authorities will respond and will see that this will remain at the heart of the transition to democracy in Egypt in the coming days and weeks.
Yemen too is a country where we are really worried about the humanitarian situation. Support is needed there too. We have given 60 million Euros already but the situation is a cause for enormous concern for the people. I have heard that President Saleh has expressed his willingness to move aside. I really hope that we see that his actions match his words. We have agreed conclusions which once again urge him to sign up immediately to the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative and we hope there will be further discussion in the Security Council on that.

On Libya we are watching events, as indeed everyone is, as they unfold on the ground in Sirte. I hope we are now witnessing the end of the resistance from the Gaddafi loyalists and an end to the loss of life. We are already taking a strong role in supporting the NTC, easing sanctions now and making more assets available in line with their requests, working closely under UN coordination with the needs assessment and making sure that we are able to offer support on everything from democracy building to security sector reform. EU Offices are now open in Benghazi and Tripoli and I hope the office in Tripoli will soon become a fully fledged EU delegation.

Syria, too. We continue to worry about the unacceptable crackdown, and disappointment was expressed in the room about the failure of the Security Council to adopt a resolution. It does not deter us from wanting to push forward and we will continue to press for strong UN action on this, and are ready to support people in the democratic transition that we hope will soon follow.

And Iran: we had a discussion on two paths about Iran. First of all our growing concern about the human rights situation there. Repression of citizens, human rights defenders, journalists, women activists, minority groups, and members of the opposition have led us to add 29 new names to our sanctions list. And I really call upon the Iranians to live up to their international obligations and to fully respect the rights of their people. I also call upon them to cooperate with the special rapporteur on human rights. We discussed too the nuclear programme: the twin-track approach that we have of wishing to engage in serious talks and keeping up the pressure from the EU and through the Security Council. In New York at the UN General Assembly I met with the six, the E3+3 as we call it, to discuss what more we can do and then I met with the Foreign Minister of Iran. And I will soon be responding to the letter that Dr. Jalili, who is the chief negotiator, my opposite number, sent to me. But I again call upon Iran to take seriously the offer that we have left on the table from the Istanbul talks, to come forward with their own ideas to build on those, and to seriously engage with us.
And then finally over lunch we discussed the Middle East peace talks. As a follow-up to the Quartet statement which you saw in New York, I hosted a meeting of the Quartet envoys in Brussels yesterday. We discussed how to move forward on the action points within the statement and how to continue to engage with the Israeli and Palestinian partners to resume substantive negotiations as soon as possible. I will be speaking to President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu this evening, and the Quartet envoys will be in touch with the parties as well to invite them to meet in the coming days. We want to make sure that we really do get the progress that is so necessary if we are going to be able to support the people of Israel and the people of Palestine into the future. And we support calls, and all ministers referred to this, to refrain from provocative actions and avoid steps that will go against our efforts to restart negotiations. Not surprisingly, the announcement – or re-announcement – of the 1,100 settlement dwellings in Gilo was mentioned by some, and deplored.