Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following her meeting with Foreign Minister of Brazil Antonio Patriota

Can I first of all say that there is no better place to start a visit to Brazil than in Rio, and this morning I had the privilege of going to the top of Sugarloaf Mountain and then visiting the Children of Hope project and to see different sides of the work that is going on in this great country. I congratulate you on having won the hosting of the World Cup and the Olympics in the next years and wish you well in preparing for that.

But I'm absolutely sure that you will seize the opportunities as a country to develop even further and even faster than you currently are. It's very good to see you again, Mr Minister, and I'm delighted that I've been able to come here. I left a very snowy Europe with many planes being cancelled, but fortunately not mine, and interestingly when I was waiting to get on the plane there was a programme on the television commending Brazil for the extraordinary work that you've done in protecting the Amazon forest. I watched that and remembered how important you have been in developing the approach - that we've been able to share - on support on the critically important issues of climate change. I look forward to Rio+20 meeting and I know there will be real collaboration between the European Union and Brazil in the future.

There are also many bilateral issues that interest us, not least trade and the potential of the Mercosur trade agreement. As a former Trade Commissioner I have a great interest in seeing that completed and I know that there are moves now to try and move us forward over the next few months. So I hope by the time we meet formally at the Summit again we might be in a position where that is if not quite finished, at least practically done.

When you and I meet we are very conscious of the international arena and events that are unfolding around us. Not surprisingly in our conversations we've talked about the situation in Syria and our grave concern for the people of Syria at this present time.
I think we will both comment on the fact that in the last 24 hours we have spoken to Nabil Al Arabi, the Secretary General of the Arab League. If I might on behalf of both of us say how much we support him and the Arab League's initiatives and the importance of seeing that leadership able to support the people of Syria into a future that is free from bloodshed and from hardship we currently see under the regime of President Assad. For my part I have been very clear that the European Union believes that he should stand aside - you cannot kill your own people and stay. We need to see a transitional process that is inclusive of all the people, the minorities within Syria as well as the majority, to find a way through to peaceful solution. Some people have talked in recent times of Yemen and the potential for such a solution to be found, but I think that the critical saying is to stand together to try and support the solution to be found. If that requires having Friends of Syria group - I don’t think it is so much about the opposition as it is about the people of Syria - and if that is something that the Arab League supported, then that would be one way to go forward.

When the EU Foreign Ministers meet in a couple of weeks they will be very keen to discuss Syria and to look again at what more might be done to put on that strong political pressure for the regime to understand that it must stop killing the people and that President Assad should stand aside in order that there can be, as I said, an inclusive discussion, an inclusive approach to the future of the country. I would expect Member States will be putting forward their ideas and we too, within the European Union, will be looking at what more we can do in order to put on as much pressure as possible, with that objective in mind.

On Iran we discussed my desire to see Iran return to the negotiating table; I know that you have worked hard in support of that objective to ensure that we are able to support Iran into a future without nuclear weapons.

I have been very clear in every statement that I have made that the purpose of our sanctions is to persuade Iran to come back to the negotiating table. It is a two track approach - there are only two tracks! - and the purpose of the sanctions is to achieve that outcome and to put the economic pressure on Iran. Iran has obligations as a signatory to the non proliferation treaty, the international community has obligations as the guardian of the treaty and that is the purpose behind it. My ambition is that Iran would be willing to pick up the proposals that I left on the table from our discussions in Istanbul a year ago or indeed as we invited at the time to put forward their own ideas, to build confidence and to take us forward. In doing that I am very keen to work with our colleagues of which Brazil is clearly an important partner in helping us to get the messages across to Iran of what we are seeking to achieve and to urge them to come to the negotiating table. This is a message I send everywhere in every possible way, because I believe the future of Iran and the people of Iran and the future of the region is better off if we are able to achieve that. In terms of the sanctions that we have just taken - these are never easy decisions to make, but we felt it was important to continue to put that pressure on and we have worked closely as a 27-member block and also been in discussion to make sure that we recognize the impact that those sanctions would have not only on Iran, but of course on ourselves.

And the Middle East Peace Process where I spent some time in recent days trying to support the King of Jordan and I really do commend his efforts in trying to bring together on an informal basis at this stage the negotiators from the Palestinian Authority and from Israel.
Amongst many other things we've discussed was also regional cooperation - our desire to work together to recognize that the strong democracy, Brazilian democracy and that of the European Union, have a history but also a real future.

And so I end as I began by what a treat it is to be here in Brazil today and to be completing my journey tomorrow in Sao Paulo and the first of what I hope will be at least another visit this year if not many more in the future. Thank you.