Remarks by the High Representative Catherine Ashton to the press, Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, Norway, 8 March 2012

What a privilege it is to be here. I positioned this trip by saying that if the European Union is going to help support what happens in the Arctic - and I believe we should and we can - then we have to see it for ourselves, we have to meet with the people who are most directly involved here: researchers and scientists, indigenous people, politicians from countries who are fully engaged and are part of the Arctic, in a way that enables us to develop the right policies.

The partnership we have with Norway is extremely important to the European Union. Here we are talking about an area where we can't do what you do, we don't want to do what you do, but we can support in an even more effective way your efforts. The changes that are happening in the Arctic and the opportunities: you see a lot of economic activity and potential within a fragile part of the world, an area that needs protection and help, whether that's the fauna, the flora, the changes in terms of climate. We need to balance those two things: challenge and opportunity.

I also think it would be for us a great achievement if we were able to become a permanent observer in the Arctic Council and we're really grateful for your support in that. But our purpose in doing it is also to be supportive, because there is no difference between us on that and our purpose is to have a policy that recognizes that both the member states of the European Union and our closest partners have a real interest in what's happening here and in helping to support that.

Our interest is being a supporter for the Arctic, a collaborator with those countries who clearly have the direct interest; in a way the interest in the Arctic is in a sense worldwide - the interest that the people have all over the world in the protection of the Arctic. I look around and see how many research stations are here and all over the world, that's no accident, it's because people recognize its importance.
And for the EU the Arctic is important, because it's an area where some of our member states are directly engaged, because it's an area of the world which requires attention due to the environmental challenges and the opportunities and we think that what we as 27 can help with some of the issues like research, funding and the way in which we operate. You see already member states investment research here. We've just been to see the French-German research project. Also in economic terms: the mining communities and what we know is happening because of the changes in climate to sea routes. It will be important to see its effects on trade in the future.

With this visit I have been given I hope a greater depth of understanding even though this is a snapshot visit and I don’t pretend that I have learned everything there is to learn. So thank you again for the invitation to come here.

Finally, you have asked about Syria: We have been really consistent with our message and as you know there is more activity going on now in New York at the moment with the Security Council. We support our member states in the Security Council in what they are trying to do to get that body to take a strong stand and we talked to other colleagues in the Security Council to try and persuade them to engage. We work very closely with the Arab League. We have supported them with their monitoring mission, we have supported them with what they need in Cairo to be able to develop their work. And we keep the pressure on as hard as we can.

What is important is to continue to put pressure on the regime to stop the violence, to stop the killing of people. Estimates vary; it was about 8700 about 10 days ago, now it has come close to 10 000 people killed, many of them men, but there are lots of children and women there too. The most important thing is now to support Kofi Anan in his work. I spoke to him the day before yesterday, wishing him every possible success. He is an extraordinary man who has been willing to take on an incredibly difficult task, but I believe we have to get right behind him on that and I hope when he gets to Damascus he will be able to make the difference and to persuade Assad that is over for him and that the killings and the violence must stop and the humanitarian aid and support can get in.