Remarks by HR Catherine Ashton upon arrival to FAC, Brussels, 23 March 2012

It's a very important Foreign Affairs Council today.

I begin by saying to you that we deeply regret and condemn the coup d'état in Mali. We are keeping very much in touch with the people there and we do hope the constitution will be restored very quickly and that we will see a return to law and order.

You know that we've been working very hard with the countries of the Sahel. Our overall strategy on Sahel will be discussed today, but obviously this will have changed the nature of the debate in the Council.

I want to talk about Syria too because today you will see a significant tightening of the sanctions.

We have 12 names on the table, and those names will be released afterwards, of people that we wish to additionally cover.

I cannot say to you in strong enough terms how much we are concerned about what's going on in Syria.

I'm really worried about the escalating spiral of violence there. What we need to have is a method by which first of all the violence stops, and as you know that's what Kofi Annan on behalf of the United Nations and the Arab League is engaged in. That's the most important thing right now for the people of Syria. Beyond that we have said that the political process needs to begin. We're talking to the different opposition groups on the ground, those both outside and inside of Syria and we still have as you know a Delegation there. All of that is with the objective of trying to now move to a situation where Assad recognizes his responsibilities, moves aside and we're able to see a genuine movement forward for the people of Syria.

Sanctions make a significant difference because they do two things: one is they target individuals and entities in ways that prevent them from carrying on their business as usual, and secondly they make a strong political statement about how the international community feels about what's going on. Never underestimate that sanctions are a really important tool.
Of course they're not everything and fit within a political framework of trying to move things forward. That's what you're seeing with the statements of the United Nations in the last couple of days, that's what we see with the work of Kofi Annan, the Friends of Syria, many different efforts that are going on at the same time in a coordinated way.

Yesterday I spoke with Kofi Annan to again offer him support for the very difficult work that he's seeking to do. My message to him was that it is a very difficult task that he is undertaking, that he is a man of great stature and it is great to see him trying to move this forward. I don't underestimate the difficulties that he has. We support him in his efforts to stop the violence which as he would be the first to say is the most important thing right now.

We are of course in discussion with Turkey about the meeting that they'll be hosting next week on Syria.

The Council will speak too about Belarus again. I'm extremely concerned about what is happening with civil society. We've been very clear with the regime in Belarus that they should release the political prisoners and that we'd want to engage with them when they comply with what we ask them to do.

We will continue to try and reach out to the people at the same time, making it clear through our political pressure what we're doing to make sure that people recognize the strength of the European Union's opinion.

Yesterday we had the Foreign Affairs Council in defence format. Defence ministers came together with the Secretary General of NATO for part of our discussions. We look forward to the NATO Summit in Chicago later on in the spring.

But we focused particularly on our operations and we will be able to confirm today the extension of the Atalanta mission until the end of 2014. This is a really important mission, the European Union coming together to tackle the problem of piracy on the high seas.

We also have our comprehensive approach in supporting the people of Somalia into a better future, and finding ways in which young men who are enticed to become pirates can be offered real alternatives and recognize that their country can be led, as I said, into a better future.

The EU Special Representative who's been down in Mogadishu in the last few days and whom I met with this week, is very engaged and trying to help the political process too and helping those countries in the region who want to protect their own borders, their own coast lines.

There are many other things to discuss too. We will be having the Foreign Minister of Turkey join us for lunch in our informal discussions and last night I was very privileged to host a dinner for the candidate countries which for the very first time included Serbia.