Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton
following the Foreign Affairs Council meeting,
Brussels, 23 March 2012

I'm going to start with Syria, where today we saw a further strengthening of sanctions. We've added
the names of 12 more people and 2 more entities to the list of those subject to sanctions: that's the
travel ban and assets freeze. These include four family members and many ministers, senior and
high profile figures from the regime. You know that the names will be published tomorrow. That
means we now have a total of 126 individuals and 41 entities who are subject to sanctions and we
will continue to step up sanctions as long as the repression continues.

We welcome too the overwhelming support this morning for the very strong UN Human Rights
Council Resolution on Syria which we introduced. That extends the mandate of the independent
international commission of enquiry. We also welcome the UN Security Council presidential
statement which backs up former Secretary General Kofi Annan's work. I spoke to the former
Secretary General yesterday to underline our support for his work and to discuss with him the way
forward. Our Council conclusions reiterate the need for full access for humanitarian organizations
to all parts of the country.

Our thoughts this morning were also with the people of Mali. We firmly condemn the coup d'état
that has taken place there. We call for an immediate end of violence, the release of state officials,
the restoration of civil constitutional government and the holding of democratic elections as soon as
possible. We will work as ever with the African Union and with the Economic Community of West
African States and we will continue with direct support to the population and humanitarian aid.

However, the Commission has decided to temporarily suspend development operations in the
country. Andris Piebalgs joined us in the discussion on this as did Kristalina Georgieva for
discussions on humanitarian aid issues.

More generally, we have welcomed progress in the implementation of our Sahel strategy and we
have approved the crisis management concept for a civilian mission in the Sahel which will focus
initially on security assistance in Niger.
We believe the situation in Belarus is getting worse and the authorities are tightening their grip on civil society, so today we are strengthening the restrictive measures to increase the pressure on the authorities. We have added 12 individuals and 29 countries to our list which brings us to a total of 243 people and 32 businesses on that list.

In parallel we are strengthening our relations with civil society and with the opposition through the European Dialogue for modernisation and we continue to coordinate as to the return of our ambassadors to Minsk. I should add, as I have said when I summed up at the end of the debate, that it was more a sense of great sadness to see Belarus move in the direction in which it is going and our desire for them to address the issues that they know are of great concern to us, in order that we can re-establish our relationships with them.

On Iran we continue to follow the twin track approach regarding their nuclear programme. I plan to announce when and where the talks will start in the coming days. We also have as you know a policy of sanctions and today we approved the implementing legislation for the most recent set of measures adopted earlier this year. We are also very concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation in the country. Today we added 17 people to the list which now has 78 that are targeted specifically for human rights violations.

As many of you know, yesterday the FAC met in Defence Minister formation. A good meeting which also included a steering board for the European Defence Agency. There we were able to welcome the substantial progress made in the pooling and sharing of military capabilities through real projects facilitated by the agency such as air to air refuelling, medical support or training. We all agreed it was crucial to further reinforce our defence cooperation if we are to sustain and enhance the CSDP in the present financial context.

We also discussed the ongoing military operations in the Horn of Africa and in BiH, including the necessity to guarantee sufficient contributions from member states.

I am delighted to say we were joined by the secretary general of NATO, Anders Rasmussen, and ahead of the Chicago Summit we reiterated the importance of the partnership and complementarity between the EU and NATO. I have also updated ministers on the state of play in the planning for potential future missions in the Horn of Africa and Sahel as well as reflections on our support for Libya.

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