The EU deploying an expert team for the by-elections in Myanmar

Brussels, 28 March 2012 - The European Union is responding positively to the invitation of the Myanmar Government to be present at the by-elections in the country on 1 April 2012. High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission Catherine Ashton has decided to deploy a small team of experts to be present on election day, joining diplomats from the EU Member States Embassies in the country. Thus, the EU, with ASEAN, the US and Australia will ensure an essential presence at this key moment of Myanmar’s political transition.

The by-elections are limited in terms of seats contested – 48 constituencies out of more than 500 seats in both Chambers – but are significant as a further confirmation of the country’s evolving political process. The European Parliament, which concluded an official mission to Myanmar recently, will be represented in the EU team, demonstrating the coherence of the Union.

The EU expects these elections to take place according to internationally accepted standards, and that the authorities will take actions against serious violations. The EU has underlined that the conduct of these by-elections will form an important element of the review of EU policy vis-à-vis Myanmar. EU Foreign Ministers will discuss this at the April Foreign Affairs Council. HR/VP Catherine Ashton will visit the country shortly after.
Background:

The by-elections follow the appointment of Members of Parliament executive positions, and are in accordance with the separation of powers. The Myanmar Government is making an effort to ensure that the elections confirm the developing democratic system. The stakes in these by-elections are high, as the majority ruling USDP party may lose some of the 48 contested seats.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her party (NLD) boycotted the general elections in November 2010 - which as it turned out were marred by serious and massive fraud. The rapprochement between the Government and the opposition outside the Parliament – as demonstrated by changes to the electoral law – has enabled the NLD to contest these by-elections. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is running in a suburb of Yangon. Her campaign has attracted crowds of over 50,000 people across the country. For health reasons, her campaign had to pause in the past few days.

In three constituencies in Kachin State (northern Myanmar) the elections are suspended, given security concerns over the ongoing ethnic conflict.

Myanmar is emerging from decades of military rule. The remarkable transition to a multi-party system has been peaceful and orderly so far. There are shortcomings in the conduct of the electoral campaign: some of these are minor (pulling down bill-boards), some are relics of the past (incomplete electoral lists), but there have also been reports of serious instances of intimidation. The High Representative has expressed her concern at these reported cases.

The President, U Thein Sein, has made clear his personal commitment to free and fair elections, and it is in this context that the invitation to the EU and others to attend the elections should be seen.