Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 23 April 2012

Today we started our discussions with Burma/Myanmar and welcomed the truly remarkable changes we have seen in the country in recent months, including the by-elections, the release of some of the political prisoners and efforts that are being made for national reconciliation.

Against that backdrop, we took a decision to open a new chapter in our relations. To encourage further reforms, we've suspended our sanctions with the exception of the arms embargo. Of course reforms in that country need to continue - we need to see further progress, in particular the unconditional release of all political prisoners and efforts to end ethnic conflicts. As I understand, we have about 700 prisoners who have been released and somewhere between 200 and 600 still there.

We are ready to assist with these efforts as well as with economic and social development. We have 150 million euros, half of which is new money. Over the course of the next few months we'll see about 100 million euros available for health, for education, alleviation of poverty, support for civil society and so on.

We will continue to support the democratic transition, including through electoral assistance and we are encouraging trade and investment in the country. All these are the messages I will pass on to both the representatives of the government and the opposition, including meetings with President U Thein Sein and with Aung San Suu Kyi, when I visit Burma/Myanmar at the end of this week. While there, I will also open the European Union office, which will help us to support Burma/Myanmar on its path to full democracy.

We also discussed Afghanistan, ahead of three important international events – the NATO Summit in Chicago, the Istanbul process in Kabul and the donors' conference in Tokyo – and we had a comprehensive debate on Afghanistan.
The situation in the country is of serious concern and we want to make sure that through these three events, the commitments to security, regional integration and development are reaffirmed. They are interdependent and of crucial importance and we want to make sure that they are respected so that Afghanistan moves forward. The European Union provides about 200 million Euros of support and together with our Member States about 1 billion Euros every year.

So we will be returning to these issues once again next month, just ahead of Chicago. I met with the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Mr Rassoul, last week, while we were both at NATO headquarters, about the situation in his country and to encourage him to tackle some of the underlying issues which concern governance and the role of women in the country both in political terms and in economic terms. And I was reassured by what he said, both to me and at the NATO meeting itself.

Our thoughts turned again today to the situation between Sudan and South Sudan and grave worries about the escalating conflict that is going on between the two. It's very clear to all of us that we need to move away from the use of force, it's not going to resolve the problems that exist between the two. So we urge them to renew their efforts on the negotiating process and to try and reach agreements through dialogue. They need to honour the Memorandum of Understanding of non-aggression and cooperation between them. And I met with President Salva Kiir recently to discuss these important issues between Khartoum and Juba. We need to see progress being made as swiftly as possible and of course to support the efforts of the African Union and President Mbeki especially to try and resolve the conflict.

You will recall that we recently announced our Sahel strategy and we have focused today on what has been the situation in recent days and weeks in Mali.

We were encouraged by the first steps towards the restoration of a legitimate civilian administration and I have spoken with President Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire recently about the efforts of ECOWAS to support the country in its future. We are continuing to monitor closely the progress of the transition and we will be able to resume development cooperation in line with progress on the ground. We are worried about the high number of externally displaced people particularly in the north where there are real problems of food shortages. And we want to see an end to violence in the north and we want to see the territorial integrity of the country restored. It is more important than ever that we implement swiftly and comprehensively the Sahel strategy and as you know we will be deploying our CSDP mission to Niger in July this year.

We strongly condemn the coup in Guinea-Bissau, and demand an immediate restoration of legitimate government. We will not recognise the self-appointed institutions. It is vital that the security of all citizens is guaranteed and that people responsible for human rights violations are held to account. To that extent we support the work of UN and ECOWAS and are prepared to impose restrictive measures against those who threaten the peace and security of that country.
Over a working lunch we have focused first of all on Syria, where we remain extremely concerned about the situation there. We have adopted new sanctions on the export of goods which could be used for repression and the export of luxury goods. We have welcomed the unanimous adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution and call for Kofi Annan's plan to be implemented immediately and in its entirety and we remain in close touch with Kofi Annan and his team. We expect the government to withdraw all troops and heavy weapons from towns and cities. We have also made sure that we have resources available for humanitarian aid. 32 million euros from the EU and its member states. We have a fund of 23 million euros from the European Commission to support civil society. We are making available a fund of 10 million euros for Lebanon to support them and we are giving 3.5 million euros to UNICEF to help support the work that they are doing with children who have come across from Syria. We want to make sure that the regime gives full access to humanitarian organizations and we will continue to assist the neighbouring countries who are helping with refugees.

We call once again on the opposition to make sure that they work towards a common inclusive opposition for Syria's future and as you probably know we have a mission on the ground in Syria today.

I also took the opportunity to update colleagues on the talks in Istanbul with Iran last weekend.

Thank you.