Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council, 14 May 2012

Today we began our discussions with Afghanistan ahead of three important meetings on Afghanistan's future – the NATO Summit in Chicago and conferences in Kabul and Tokyo.

First of all we reaffirmed our long-term commitment to the country. Our support will focus on support for governance, including significant work with the Afghan police force, and the rule of law, as well as on sectors like health and rural development.

Currently the financial support from the EU budget amounts to 200 million euros annually and we are looking at how to increase this in the coming years.

Of course our support depends on the fulfilment of the reform obligations by the Afghan authorities.

We also had a long, substantial discussion on the Middle East Peace Process and agreed new Council Conclusions reaffirming our commitment to a two-state solution and the need to be aware of the aspirations of the people of the region, including those of the Palestinians for statehood and those of the Israelis for security.
We have welcomed the exchange of letters between the parties and Prime Minister Netanyahu's statement that the new Israeli Government will try to advance the peace process. We believe that this should be an urgent priority and I hope progress will be made without delay.

Our conclusions also covered the fact that settlements are illegal under international law, an obstacle to peace and threaten the viability of a two-state solution. They also run contrary to the long-term interests of Israel for peace and security.

We condemned the rocket attacks into Israel and expressed in unequivocal terms our fundamental commitment to the security of Israel.

In the course of our discussions we have also looked at the hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners. We have been following this issue very closely and have remained engaged, including through our Delegation, in the ongoing efforts to find a solution. Our Heads of Missions already issued a statement on this issue last week.

We are very concerned about the critical health condition of the Palestinians held in Israeli administrative detention who have been on hunger strike for more than two months. There are positive signals about a possible solution and I urge Israel and all sides to do everything possible to find an immediate solution to the current situation and prevent any loss of life.

We have discussed Syria. The continuing violence is appalling and we call on the Syrian regime to fully and unconditionally comply with Kofi Annan's 6-point plan. We have urged the prompt deployment of the full mission. The EU and its Member States are providing support to the mission, as requested by the UN.

The main responsibility for implementing the plan lies with the Syrian authorities.

We also condemn unreservedly the recent deadly bomb attacks. A complete cessation of violence by all parties is the most urgent and essential step to take forward Kofi Annan's plan.

The ultimate goal is, of course, a peaceful, Syrian-led and inclusive dialogue which meets the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people.

We decided today to add 3 individuals and 2 entities to the sanctions list. That brings the total to 128 people and 43 entities. The sanctions target the regime, not the civilian population. As long as the repression continues, we will continue to put pressure on those responsible for it.

We also discussed the situation in Libya and reaffirmed our support to the democratic transition process – particularly in light of the upcoming elections. We believe that Libya still faces multiple challenges but has made significant progress in a short time. And we will continue to support them.

The needs assessment on border management led by the EU is on track and we will ensure concrete follow-up. We are also making progress in our work on media and our support to civil society.
We also discussed the management of migration, which is also a key interest for the EU and Libya. We will continue working closely together with Commissioner Malmström and our Member States.

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Over lunch time we discussed first of all the latest developments in Ukraine which are a cause of concern. The EU and Ukraine initialled the Association and Trade Agreement at the end of March and we wish to sign it, but Ukraine needs to show that it lives in the spirit of this political association.

We expect Ukraine to address the issues of politically motivated trials, independence of the judiciary and selective use of law - they marred the case of Yulia Tymoshenko and other opposition leaders and they need to be resolved.

We will follow the parliamentary elections in October very closely. We believe that all candidates who wish so must be able to run, and the conditions of the electoral campaign and the voting process will be crucial for our assessment of these elections.

We also touched upon the issue of the European Football Championship, Euro 2012. We are not at the stage of making decisions on attendance, but will follow developments carefully and consider what happens next in the light of developments in Ukraine. I will of course listen to the news that Prime Minister Azarov will bring to us tomorrow.

In light of the elections as well as the upcoming EU-Russia summit (3 and 4 June in St Petersburg), we also discussed the strategic partnership with Russia, our biggest neighbour and one of our most important trade partners.

Thank you.