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

We started today with a condemnation of the terrorist attack against Israeli citizens in Bulgaria last week. Everyone expressed deep shock that such an attack could have taken place within the European Union. We have always utterly condemned all acts of terrorism, wherever they take place. We are very aware that the investigation is ongoing and trust that all those responsible for this crime will be brought to justice.

Not surprisingly a large part of our discussion this morning was on the continuing crisis in Syria. We, as you know, have continually called for the backing of Kofi Annan and the work that he is doing. I very much regret that the Security Council was not able to adopt a strong resolution last week and we will continue to call on Russia and China to increase the pressure on the regime. We recognized how important it is that the tragedy in Syria does not spread to the rest of the region and we are continuing to provide support to neighbouring countries which are feeling the effects, especially of those who are now fleeing from the crisis. The Commission today announced it is doubling its aid for emergency medical care, shelter, food and water to those Syrians most affected by the ever-worsening crisis, both inside and outside the country. An additional €20 million of relief aid will bring the European Commission's total assistance in this crisis to €63 million. Member States have contributed to date €27.5 million in humanitarian aid. In response too to this ever increasing violence, we have strengthened the enforcement of the EU arms embargo against Syria. European Union countries will be obliged to inspect vessels and aircraft heading to Syria if they suspect the cargo contains arms or equipment for internal repression. It applies in member states' seaports and airports as well as in their territorial waters, in accordance with international law. We also froze the assets of three entities supporting the regime and added 26 people responsible for the violent repression to the travel ban and asset freeze, which brings the total number of people subject to sanctions to 155 and the number of entities to 52. It is, as you're all aware, the seventeenth round of EU sanctions against the Syrian regime. The list will be published tomorrow in the EU Official Journal.
I wanted to mention Zimbabwe, because since I met the Ministerial Re-engagement Committee in May I have been working very hard on measures to recognize the progress made in Zimbabwe, to improve the freedom and prosperity of the people of that country. And as a result of this work and the agreement of all Member States to our proposals, we will today suspend some of the measures applying to Zimbabwe.

I also debriefed ministers on the historic elections in Libya. As you know we had an Election Assessment Team who found that the elections were generally peaceful and transparent. We provided significant electoral support and we are ready to engage with the National General Congress to help them get up and running. And we have a number of assistance projects, worth over €35 million in Libya. That covers activities such as de-mining, the strengthening of the public administration, support for civil society, education, health and migration. And we're very much looking forward to working with the next government in Libya.

I was pleased to debrief ministers on my successful visit to Egypt last week. This was my first meeting with President Morsi, and it was in my view very successful. I underlined how the European Union was committed to supporting Egypt as it continues its transition. I stressed that we want to see an inclusive solution to the current parliamentary crisis and that priority should be given to appointing a civilian and democratically elected government and putting in place a transparent constitutional framework. Egypt is an important neighbour and a key player in the Arab world. We are now moving forward with the preparation of the Task Force for Egypt, which will focus economic aid from both the public and private sector.

We also had an extensive discussion on three areas of Africa which are causing great concern. We are extremely concerned about the situation in Mali, and the implications for the region as a whole. As you know, we have seen many human rights violations in the North and the wanton destruction in Timbuktu. We're supporting the efforts of ECOWAS and the African Union to find a solution, but of course unless adequate progress is made, we may rapidly adopt targeted measures.

I reminded Ministers today about the launch last week of the new CSDP mission to support the fight against organised crime and terrorism in the Sahel. We have put together 80 staff, and a budget in the first year of €8.7 million, and this operation will begin in Niger, but could be extended further.

We are also following with concern the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the Eastern DRC. We have been active in urging both DRC and Rwanda to exercise restraint and enter negotiation, and we are willing and ready to step up our work to re-establish peace and trust, as I said to President Kagami when I spoke to him last week.
And on Sudan and South Sudan, we've urged both states to implement the African Union Roadmap and the UN Security Council Resolution before the August 2 deadline. And I remain extremely worried about the situation in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, and call on the government of Sudan to allow immediate access. We are also following the demonstrations in Sudan and urge the government to respect citizens' rights to express their views. To conclude, it is crucial that the two can coexist in peace as two viable states.

This afternoon we are meeting the foreign ministers of the six partner countries of the Eastern Partnership. This remains a high priority for the European Union and we will have an exchange of views on the progress that has been achieved so far.

Thank you.