Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the 11th South Africa-EU Ministerial Political Dialogue with Foreign Minister Nkoana-Mashabane

I am delighted to be in South Africa today and especially to have the chance to continue this Ministerial Dialogue and to work on the preparation for the summit that will follow in September in Brussels.

I want to state at the beginning, of course, my sadness at the loss of life at the Marikana mine last week. I know this is something that has dominated the agenda here and my thoughts are with the bereaved families at this time. I know too that there is a commission of enquiry now being established to look into this terrible situation.

I had the privilege this morning to meet with Mrs Zuma and to congratulate her on her new role as Chair of the African Union. I was very impressed by the range of issues that already she is considering taking on in this role. But it was an especial pleasure as I have said to have the chance to meet with you again, Minister. We meet all over the world at various meetings but it is always a pleasure to be able to find time to continue to develop this partnership.

I want to say how important this partnership is economically to the European Union and to South Africa. It is the first year of the full implementation of our bilateral trade, development and cooperation agreement and this has given us increased opportunities for two-way trade. The European Union is South Africa's main trading partner, we are the first foreign investor and the most important development partner, and extremely pleased about that. These are not the easiest times, economically, for either of us, but I believe we should continue to work harder together to ensure that we provide the opportunities to stimulate growth and to provide jobs for our people.

1 Check against delivery
It is also important that the European Union and South Africa stand together in their responsibility to show leadership on conflict resolution. The Minister has talked about some of the related issues that we have been discussing today and I particularly wanted to focus on two or three of them.

The first is our efforts to combat piracy, and to do so by developing a really comprehensive approach: to support the people of Somalia, into a better future; to support the World Food Programme, to be able to deliver food to some of the neediest people in the world; to support trade, to be able to operate properly; to help the countries who are most blighted by piracy, to be able to better deal with the situation by patrolling their waters and by having security on their land; and as I have said about developing the economy of Somalia, to be able to provide alternatives – real jobs, real futures – for young and old alike in that country. Our collaboration with South Africa on this is extremely important to us.

As the Minister has also said, we are working together to consider how best to support the people of Zimbabwe. I pay tribute to the work that South Africa has done, the facilitation they have taken up, which has guided the approach that we too have taken. As you will have seen, we have relaxed our targeted restrictive measures against individuals and companies in February and we have suspended measures limiting our development cooperation. That followed the visit of the Zimbabwe ministerial re-engagement team in May. And we want to see greater momentum; we want to see the reforms and the implementation of the Global Political Agreement. We share the same objective as South Africa: to contribute to a peaceful and stable Zimbabwe based on democratic legitimacy. The foundation for that of course is the constitution.

And finally, as the Minister has also pointed to, our efforts to work with Iran. As you know, on behalf of the P5+1 (the E3+3), I lead the negotiations with Iran to ensure the purely peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear programme. I am extremely grateful for the support from countries across the world and, as I am here, especially from South Africa in helping to urge Iran to ensure that is the approach they take.

As we said at the beginning, this is a chance to prepare for the summit and on behalf of President Van Rompuy and President Barroso, I want to say how much we are looking forward to welcoming President Zuma – and welcoming you – when we have the summit in Brussels in September.