Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 19th November 2012

Let me start with the unfolding situation in Gaza which of course is of grave concern to all of us. In our debate today, we deeply regretted the loss of life on both sides. We believe the attacks must end immediately, or even more innocent civilians will suffer.

We are calling for urgent de-escalation and cessation of hostilities. In this respect we support the mediation efforts of Egypt and other parties.

I have myself been in regular contact with a number of different people including the Israeli Prime Minister, Palestinian Prime Minister, the Arab League and Egypt, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu.

I will continue to work with all our partners to help to bring about a de-escalation of the situation, protect civilians and work for a rapid ceasefire.

You've heard me say many times before that a long-term solution for Gaza and moving towards a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a necessity and it's very important to help stabilise the entire region.

We discussed the situation in Syria where we remain horrified by what is going on and concerned about the spill-over to neighbouring countries.

Ministers repeated their support for Joint Special Envoy Brahimi, who we met last week when we were in Cairo for the joint EU-LAS Ministerial meeting.

We welcomed the agreement to create the new opposition Coalition, whose leader, Mr El Khatib, I met last week in Cairo. We have called for a long time for the opposition to unite.
We consider the Coalition legitimate representatives of the aspirations of the Syrian people.

It’s important that the Coalition works for full inclusiveness, human rights and democracy, engaging with all opposition groups and with civil society. We hope they will work with Mr Brahimi to put forward a programme for a political transition.

We are very conscious that winter is approaching fast, we are committed to increasing humanitarian assistance and we call on others to do the same.

As you know, we began the day with very useful meetings with defence ministers, first at the Steering Board of the European Defence Agency and then in the Council.

We all agreed on the importance of further developing our military capabilities in Europe to sustain and enhance our Common Security and Defence Policy.

I therefore welcomed the adoption of a Code of Conduct for Pooling and Sharing, which includes concrete actions to help Member States mainstream Pooling and Sharing into their national planning - to make cooperation much more the rule. Ministers also approved the budget for next year.

We discussed the EU defence industry following a briefing with my colleague Michel Barnier, the Commissioner for internal market and services, who presented the work of the European Commission's Task Force on Defence.

We agree that a strong industrial base is vital for our capabilities and there was unanimous support for the Commission's work in close cooperation with the EEAS and the EDA. This initiative is important and timely, in particular as we prepare for a discussion on defence by the European Council at the end of 2013.

We also discussed the on-going military operations, Atalanta, EUTM Somalia and EUFOR Althea, with the participation of the Secretary-General of NATO.

We looked at the considerable achievements that have been made and looked to the future as the situation on the missions evolves.

We are also of course extremely worried by the deteriorating situation in Mali, and especially the humanitarian situation, which is getting worse.

We remain committed to try and help the Malian people.

The Council today called on all parties to agree on a road map for a rapid political transition. This would allow us to resume development cooperation.

We believe there is a need to respond quickly to security and terrorist threats within a framework to be defined by the UN Security Council.

In the meantime, we will continue to plan for a possible CSDP mission to train and restructure the Malian security forces.
I am pleased to say that ministers welcomed the proposal for a Crisis Management Concept, which I tabled today in a joint meeting between Defence and Foreign Ministers.

We've also have been following today the latest developments in the Eastern DRC with concern. The M23 must immediately stop the military offensive in Eastern DRC. And the support to the M23 in violation of the sanctions regime and the arms embargo should stop. Those who have influence over the rebels should make it their priority to urge an immediate end to the fighting. This conflict has a huge, high, human cost. All parties must allow unrestricted humanitarian access to those in need.

It's also important to encourage the UN Peace keeping mission, MONUSCO, to play an active role in managing the crisis. So we call on all involved including neighbouring countries to take necessary steps to avoid further deterioration of the situation and to prevent this conflict from spreading.

Our discussion today was very timely and we recognise the complexity and longstanding nature of the problems in the great lakes region. And we are supportive of all efforts by the UN – I spoke to the Secretary General Ban ki Moon at end of last week – the African Union and the international community to address this crisis.