Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the Situation in Mali, European Parliament

Madame President,

I would like to thank President Schulz and all political groups for the cooperation and flexibility you have shown in making space in today's agenda to debate the situation in Mali.

This is something that I have felt very strongly in this very turbulent week that I want to be able to do, as we bring together our services in the crisis platform and as we talk with the Malian government and as I convene the FAC in emergency session this week.

As you have seen, the situation in Mali has changed dramatically over the past week. The intentions of jihadist rebels and terrorists in northern Mali have become clearer when they launched an offensive further south and took the city of Konna in the region of Mopti, only a few hundred kilometres away from the capital Bamako: It was clear as we analysed the situation as it happened that they wish to seize as much territory within Mali as possible and to reinforce their position before the international community was fully ready to act. They also wished to destabilize the government in Bamako to make it even more difficult for the international community to bring its support to the Malian people. The consequences of this are already clear from the actions perpetrated in northern Mali by these radical groups. There have been the horrific abuses of human rights, the desecration of holy and cultural sites, the trampling of political and religious freedom, and the threat posed to all neighbouring countries.

That threat extends to the EU itself. We are directly impacted by the situation there. Terrorist groups based in northern Mali use this territory they control for all kind of trafficking, drugs, arms smuggling. They have taken many hostages, a lot of them originating from European Member States. We cannot be indifferent.
I pay tribute to those member states, particularly France, as well as the countries of West Africa, who have come to Mali’s aid. It is important that the rebels understand that the international community is united in supporting the Malian people against those that wish to impose an undemocratic and violent regime over them.

As the UN Security Council concluded on 10th and on the 14th January the aggressive actions of the rebels “constituted a direct threat to international peace and security”. I've strongly condemned this aggression.

What we are facing today in Mali is a matter of emergency. We have to act. Failing to do so would be a great political, strategic and humanitarian mistake.

Like other international organisations – not just the UN but the AU and ECOWAS – as well as a number of member states led by France and other African countries, the EU has responded to the appeal of President Traoré of Mali for help. Coordination and involvement is absolutely necessary. The states of the region are playing a key role and the decision of Algeria and Morocco to allow for the use of their air space is a good example of this international mobilisation.

This will be very much a collective effort. But the EU, which has taken the lead in defining a strategy to resolve the problems of the Sahel region, has a critical role to play. I set out the EU’s commitment to support the people of Mali already in a statement on 11 January. But more important now is to act rapidly.

Since the end of last week, the EEAS and Commission colleagues have put together a package of measures that will provide immediate and longer term help to the Malian Government and people.

Yesterday I chaired a meeting of the EU’s Crisis Platform to pull the threads together and spoke again to Laurent Fabius on the state of play on the ground. Taking all these elements into account and the emergency of the situation, I announced an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council which will discuss this package of actions and adopt immediate measures. As I reiterated yesterday in a statement, we need to accelerate our course of action.

The Foreign Minister of Mali is on his way to Brussels to meet with me bilaterally and then to join us at the Foreign Affairs Council.

The EU has already agreed to provide a Training Mission to help the Malian Army restructure and enhance their capacity to defend the people against such threats (EUTM). We intend to deploy this Mission as swiftly as possible and quicker than planned. Though circumstances have changed, the need for Mali to have an efficient and professional military, under civilian control, is all the more urgent and, in the long run, essential for Mali’s viability and territorial integrity. So we will adapt accordingly the details of our mission, get the agreement of our Member States and send without further delay to Mali the first preparatory and technical elements of that mission.

The EU has also undertaken to support those African countries providing troops for the UN-AU mandated African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). One key part of this international effort is to underline the need for a genuine African ownership of this whole initiative.
I am working with Commissioner Piebalgs and the Member States to ensure that our financial support, through the African Peace Facility, can be provided in a timely manner, given that this is now being deployed more quickly than originally planned. We also have to think about logistical support, as the deployment of this African-led force is key for fighting against terrorist groups and restoring Malian territorial integrity.

We are looking at ways we can support President Traore and his government to put the country back on the proper democratic and constitutional path. Honourable members will know as we have talked about our position on the Sahel and our overarching strategy, that Mali has been through a traumatic period over the last year. Two things are now quite clear: that the Malian Army’s job is to defend the people, not run the government; and secondly that the Malian Government must respond to the needs of the people, helping their development and respecting their diversity. The EU can help with both of those.

We are looking also to the increase our Humanitarian support. This assistance never stopped (58 million euros already in 2012 – 20 million euros immediately available) and is going to continue, even in difficult conditions, in order to meet the growing needs of the Malian population, internally displaced persons and refugees, women and children that are the first ones to suffer from such a crisis.

It is part of our Comprehensive Approach that we try to tackle the full range of issues that will help build a more stable and prosperous future for the country. That is one reason I intend to appoint an EU Special Representative for the Sahel, to increase our ability to deliver help to all the countries of the region and take part even more actively in the necessary international coordination mechanisms.

But the survival of Mali must come first with the need to protect, promote and respect the sovereignty, the unity and the integrity of the Malian nation. That is the immediate priority. And that is where our immediate help is focussed.