Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council

It was a great honour today to welcome the President of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, to the Council. I was privileged to have a long discussion with him yesterday too. We recognised that Somalia has made remarkable progress and I am very proud of the close partnership that we, the European Union, have with Somalia. We can see that Somalia has arrived at an historic opportunity to leave behind two decades of conflict.

It was very clear from our discussion that there remains much to be done and we are determined to help Somalia advance further towards lasting peace and prosperity. In the autumn, we will host a conference where we hope to create a 'Compact', a new deal between Somalia and the international community.

On that occasion we will focus on reconstruction, building the political institutions in Somalia, promoting socio-economic development and helping to establish security and the rule of law. I hope that the recent progress in Somalia is a positive example to many countries in the region. And it's clear in our discussions with the President and the deputy Prime Minister who accompanied him, that a precondition for peace is going to be stability in its wider neighbourhood.

The message today is that much has been achieved, but of course that we cannot become complacent. And we will continue to do all we can from the European Union to support Somalia in what we call a "comprehensive approach".

We were unanimous too in expressing our gratitude and support to France for its efforts in fighting terrorism in Mali. Since our special Council meeting two weeks ago, we have stepped up our EU response and accelerated preparation for the EU Training Mission. We have increased humanitarian assistance, pledged support to the African-led mission in Mali and created a clearing house to support that.
The Malian government and National Assembly have responded by adopting the Roadmap for political transition.

Next Tuesday, we will host a special ministerial meeting of the support and follow-up group on Mali, which will be co-chaired by the African Union, the UN and ECOWAS.

That meeting will reinforce international cooperation, support the concrete implementation of the roadmap and follow up the international donors' conference at which the European Union announced a contribution of 50 million Euros in support of the African-led operation (AFISMA). We will shortly be formally launching our Training Mission in Mali and its head, General Lecointre, has already made his first visit to the country. Earlier this week, Member States began pledging staff and resources for the mission. I believe our response has been fast and well-coordinated. And it will continue.

Ahead of next week's European Council, we had an in-depth discussion on our southern neighbourhood, focusing on Syria and Egypt. I have invited Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to the next FAC on 18th February. Our focus is to give all the support we can to his efforts to find a political resolution to the terrible crisis. We have actively engaged with the opposition. We have encouraged them to continue working on their internal structures while remaining committed to the principles of inclusiveness, human rights and the rule of law. The situation is clearly getting worse, and the level of violence is unacceptable.

While we do all we can to work with our international partners on a political solution, we will continue to help the people of Syria as much as we can. We are the largest humanitarian donor to the Syrian crisis. The EU has already given 358 million Euros in aid to Syrians inside and outside the country. This was confirmed again at yesterday’s humanitarian conference in Kuwait. We will continue our work and go into these issues in even greater detail on 18th February.

We continue to watch closely developments in Egypt. We remain in constant touch with government as well as the opposition. We underline that inclusive dialogue is important for the future of the country and are committed to doing all we can to support the transition to democracy, and to help the economic recovery, which is so important to political progress. We need to stay engaged. The recent violence we have seen in Port Said was worrying and underlined the need for an enhanced and inclusive political dialogue among all groups in society. In this respect, the most recent signals from the opposition are very welcome.

We covered a number of other issues but I just wanted to finally mention our exchange of views on the EU policy towards the Arctic, on the basis of the Communication of last June. The Arctic is of increasing importance to the EU and we are keen to intensify our dialogue with the Arctic states, to meet the challenge together of safeguarding the environment and taking the opportunities the Arctic offers in a sustainable way. As you know we have applied for observer status in the Arctic Council.

Thank you