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

It was a very interesting Council. Let me just pick up a few of the highlights. If I begin with Syria, of course the Council reaffirmed its position that the violence remains totally unacceptable. We were all encouraged by the recent initiative by the coalition leader Sheik Moaz Al Khatib for a political dialogue. We hope that representatives of Syrian regime do not miss this opportunity to help end the violence. We continue to give our full support to the efforts of the Joint special representative Brahimi, who will join us next month. We will continue our help to the innocent victims of the conflict. EU humanitarian aid is now at 600 million Euros.

Today we also agreed to extend sanctions against Syria for a further three months and we are amending them so as to enable greater non-lethal support and technical assistance for the protection of civilians. We will of course continue to assess and review the sanctions regime, if necessary, to support and help the opposition and to ensure that we are providing the best we can for the people on the ground.

Our discussions on Mali were of course very important, because today we have launched the EU training mission which will help to reorganize, advise and train the Malian armed forces. We believe they should, of course, operate under civilian authority. This is a very important project. We will begin providing advice immediately and military training in a few weeks. We have committed to resume our development assistance to Mali, which is worth some EUR 250 Million this year, all of this linked of course very closely to the Malian government's efforts to implement the road map. We look forward to the Malian authorities setting up a National Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission as soon as possible. On Friday we announced 20 million euros from the Instrument for Stability to help security and the delivery of basic services in the areas freed from the rebels and to begin the preparations for elections. Further financial aid will follow.
The Council today agreed to suspend the travel ban on 6 members of the Zimbabwean government. We have also taken 21 people and one company off our sanctions list. This is in recognition of significant political progress in the country. In particular, the agreement between the political parties on a final draft constitution and the announcement of a referendum. This adds further momentum to the reform process and paves the way for peaceful, transparent and credible elections later this year. We have made it clear we are ready to go further as further progress is made. A peaceful and credible constitutional referendum would be an important milestone. We hope that all political parties will continue the positive momentum.

We have today also started our discussions ahead of the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November. We believe that it is very important to recognize that this summit will be a milestone in our relationship.

But this is only going to be possible if both the EU and the partner countries deliver on the commitments we have made.

For our partners the important message is that the pace of reforms will determine the intensity of the cooperation.

Those partners most engaged in reform will benefit most from their relationship with the EU. Finally, over lunch we discussed the Middle East Peace Process. As you know, we have long said that we believe in a two state solution, that we want to press forward and to see the development of an internationally supported framework so that we can see negotiations between the parties.

We are working closely with our partners and in the region to create the conditions for establishing such a framework.

And as we have said many times, this has to be a solution that addresses both the Palestinian aspirations for statehood and sovereignty and the Israeli concerns for security.