Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers, Dublin, 23 March 2013

I would like to thank Eamon Gilmore and all of his staff for their hospitality and the excellent organisation of this Gymnich meeting.

We've had a very productive two days. As you know, we have begun with a discussion on the terrible situation in Syria and from the remarks that I have put out yesterday you will see how united the European Union is in the need to find a political solution to end the bloodshed in Syria and to support the people into the future they aspire to.

We have reiterated very strongly our support for efforts by the international community, including the EU, to achieve this, and we will continue to reach out to all concerned to give new momentum to such a political solution.

Of course we are looking at how to increase assistance to the moderate Syrian opposition, in particular through political and economic support and we continue to put as much pressure as we can on the regime and to increase that pressure to participate in a meaningful political process in line with the Geneva Communique.

Everyone is aware that we have to review our sanctions package by 1 June. So, in the coming weeks this will be an opportunity to examine all options to achieve the EU’s goals.

Following our discussions here in Dublin, I have asked for discussions to continue in all the relevant groups of the Council in Brussels over these coming weeks.

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We have a real sense of urgency about the situation in Syria and in the neighbouring countries. When I met with Brigadier General Idriss last week from the Free Syrian Army, we discussed the kind of support that he needed in the context of what we have said about technical assistance and non-lethal support. We are looking all the time to try and make sure that our humanitarian aid is getting through, in the situation where the numbers of refugees inside and outside the country are growing by thousands every day. So, you should understand the real sense of urgency there to try and find ways that we can ensure some political process. Because that is what everyone agrees is going to be needed to solve this, to stop the killing and to move the country forward. Within that context, Member States want to talk about all possible options. The focus has been perhaps on one of those. But if you were in the room you would have heard many contributions about what we can do and how we can do more. Working with Mr. Brahimi, working with Sheikh Al-Khatib, looking at how to support the UN, looking at ways in which we can work with the countries of Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and you have seen the situation in Lebanon today. So please put it in that context that this is about making sure that we keep reviewing and looking at how we believe we can best go forward. What was clear from everybody is that there has to be a political solution. The issue is how to help get that and that is why Member States need to keep this debate moving forward, alive and real and discussing the situation as it unfolds.

The objective we have is a political solution: to stop the killing, to get humanitarian aid to people as quickly and effectively as possible. All of you will have been witnessing and some of you through your media are drawing attention every day to the plight of the people and especially the children in Syria. So it's important that people understand how much needs to be done. In order to do that, the sanctions are one part of it, but there are a lot of different things we have to do. We have to constantly look at our sanctions to make sure that we are able to support the people as effectively as we possibly can. And that means reviewing every day to ensure that we offer the best possible support that we can to the people. But I say again that the sanctions regime is one part of this. The real challenge is how do we get a political solution that is going to be necessary that will enable the fighting to stop, the killing to stop and people to be able to start picking up the pieces of their lives and their country with our help to try and get into the future. And all efforts on that are so important right now. The situation is moving quickly, is extraordinarily fragile in my view, especially when you look at so many people who are now displaced, now coming across into other countries, where those countries themselves are going to need more and more help. We really have to increase the efforts that are already under way to try to get to that point.

You also know that we have had a detailed and very constructive discussion on the EEAS review which I am leading. We have been building on a number of different papers which I am very grateful to Member States for circulating beforehand.

We were delighted to welcome Elmar Brok, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, and Vice-President Maros Sefcovic from the Commission.

Their contributions were extremely valuable in our discussions. I have to say that all interventions were very supportive of the work of the new service and the progress made in the two years since it came into existence.

Those supportive remarks were also echoed by the parliament whose draft report on the review was discussed in the committee on Thursday.
Inevitably and rightly we looked at a number of suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of the new service, looking at the internal organisation, relations with the other institutions and cooperation on the ground between our delegations and Member States' embassies.

Based on these different inputs, I will produce a paper, as foreseen by the decision we took when we set up the service, in July.

There are different aspects to the review in terms of what we want to achieve but I think that the most important reforms are about ensuring that when we look back, that we have the right interinstitutional framework. And by that I mean that you always have to be certain that you have got a relationship with all the institutions that enable the foreign policy to develop and grow.

In terms of what is happening with the Iran talks, I have had the reports back from the technical discussions. Their objective as you know is simply to be able to show nuclear physicist to nuclear physicist exactly what our proposals are talking about. They are not political negotiations. They are about explanation so that when we meet again in Almaty we can be confident that we have explained in detail what we are proposing to Iran and hope that Iran will come forward with a positive answer to those proposals. I am not going to comment on what comes out of Teheran by way of statements. My experience is to work with the Iranians when we meet, to work with them on the specifics and to of course seek the diplomatic solution.