Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton

at the EU High Level Conference on the Education and Development

It is a great pleasure to be here today and to have the opportunity to talk with you briefly about education.

I believe very passionately that the reason that you are in this room is because we were fortunate to be educated. It is the underpinning to our success, to the success of every person who has a privilege to be educated, for communities, for countries.

In a school in Somalia there is the phrase: "Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world." These words were said by President Nelson Mandela. The fact that this slogan now appears in schools all over the world is a demonstration not just of his power, but of the truth of that statement.

So I want to take you on a journey to three schools.

I want to begin by taking you on a very dusty summer's day to a school where children are busy doing catch up lessons. This is a phenomenon that schools have all over the world: children doing extra lessons in maths and in this case in Arabic, particularly the boys who are sitting in a very hot dusty classroom and who are learning about mathematics and who are learning about being in school. We are in the middle of Gaza. Outside there are children who are, for the very first time ever, enjoying being in a small swimming pool, making kites, developing papier mache models. I asked the boys what they want to be when they grow up - they want to be footballers and astronauts and teachers. They want to be what all the children around the world want to be. But in this dusty difficult place they come to school every day through their summer to try and get the education that they need in difficult circumstances.

And then we are going to Haiti where 220,000 people died in 23 seconds and 5,000 schools were destroyed immediately. And you will come with me to watch people rebuilding the schools, children traumatised, who have lost everything, who have no idea what the future of their family, of their community will be, sitting in hastily built tents, having the opportunity to learn and being together. You will see those children continuing with their education.
For my final visit in this speech we are going to Jordan. We are going to the refugee camps for Syrian refugees who are coming over the border with Jordan at about 5,000 to 7,000 people every day. And in the middle of this place which is difficult, to put at its mildest, you will see schools, you will see children drawing and painting and colouring, learning and reading.

There different places, three different difficult places, where children are not living the kind of lives that we would wish to see them living, but where education for them is vital.

So my message is this: whatever the reason for conflict, or crisis or difficulty or challenge, children need to be educated. They will do better emotionally, they will do better dealing with the problems and challenges they have, but more than anything they are much more likely to be able to succeed in life if we continue to provide them with education. I call it education in a suitcase.

Wherever we are in the world, wherever we see children who have the need for education it should be provided just as we provide shelter and we provide food and we provide water. It should be part of what we do as a society, because without it they won't get to sit in a room like this, and be people like you and they deserve to have that. And I mean education for all.

I'm very proud of the number of girls going to school in Afghanistan, I'm very proud of the work that we are doing in our programmes in Somalia. I'm very proud to see more and more women entering life fully educated, but I'm fed up of the word "first". I'm the first woman Trade Commissioner, I'm the first High Representative but also the first woman. I've been first a number of times. I'd quite like to be 25th or 100th, or not even mentioned for the number.

So educating girls and helping women to become fully part of society is for me extremely important. But education is not just about giving people the where-with-all to be participants in society. It's about the growth of the human being, and one of my favourite phrases comes from the poet Yeats, simply this: "Education is not the filling of a bucket, it's the lighting of a fire". Thank you.