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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 16th December, 2013

I debriefed ministers on the agreement reached with Iran on the 24th of November. As you have seen last week, our technical experts began discussions with their Iranian counterparts on the implementation of this agreement.

Those discussions will continue. Tomorrow morning I will be meeting, together with Helga Schmid, the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Araghchi.

We have agreed today Council Conclusions, which call for swift implementation of the agreed steps.

Of course we consistently say it is important that we refrain from actions that could delay the process. And as you already know, the E3 +3 have made a commitment to refrain from additional sanctions for the implementation period.

It is a very sensitive diplomatic process. I will personally remain very committed on a daily basis, as it is the path to a peaceful and swift resolution of the concerns of the international community on the Iranian nuclear programme.

We spent some time discussing and assessing the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. It had as you know concrete and substantive results, particularly the initialling of the Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova, with a view to signature next year.

We discussed the situation in Ukraine. As you know, I visited Kyiv last week and spoke to President Yanukovich twice. I also met with the opposition leaders, civil society and the three former presidents.

Ministers confirmed again today the European Union's readiness to sign the Association Agreement with its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area part as soon as Ukraine is ready and the relevant conditions are met.

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We believe that the Agreement provides the best way to address Ukraine's short term economic challenges. Its signature too would send a powerful signal of confidence to international markets and to financial institutions.

And it also serves as a blueprint for political and economic reforms and therefore long term development perspectives.

We also reaffirmed the need to find a negotiated solution to the current political stalemate and a dialogue between the different stakeholders. As I said while I was there, we stand ready to be engaged and to assist.

Ministers welcomed the public support for the political association and economic integration with the European Union by so many across Ukraine, who demonstrated yet again this weekend. So we urge the authorities in Ukraine to ensure that the citizens have the right of expression and of assembly and urge everyone to refrain from using any violence. As I said when I was in Kyiv, we also want to see an adequate investigation of the recent acts of violence against peaceful protesters and the release of the remaining detained demonstrators. We think it is extremely important and that the solution to this political crisis is an indispensable step to tackle the economic difficulties of the country.

Over lunch we had a meeting with Foreign Minister Lavrov, and we have started to discuss preparations for the upcoming EU-Russia Summit that takes place at the end of January.

We are strategic partners and there are a number of international files where we work closely together. I have already mentioned Iran, as it is perhaps the best example.

We also believe we can take our bilateral relationship further, in particular through the comprehensive and ambitious New Agreement.

We discussed the Eastern Partnership and I stressed to Minister Lavrov that Russia too will benefit from more stability and prosperity from what this Partnership can bring to our Eastern Partners, including Ukraine, and therefore also to Russia.

Our association and free trade agreements are fully compatible with existing trade agreements and respect the traditional links between Russia and its neighbours. We believe Ukraine can have strong and good relations with all neighbours and that goes too for all of our Eastern partners.

We discussed the situation in the Central African Republic, which is alarming.

The international community needs to act decisively to stop the crisis from deepening further and we very much welcome the French intervention in support of the operation - to which the EU has pledged funding of 50 million euros.

We have also provided considerable humanitarian assistance, including a new decision today worth 18.5 million euros.

Besides the important need to improve security, we need to support the political process to allow elections to be organized by February 2015 at the very latest.

My services are working hard to look into the best ways to address the crisis and help people in the country.

And more generally, we are continuing to look at how we can work more closely with our African partners to ensure more rapid responses to such crises.

We discussed other issues too, Syria, Lebanon, the Western Balkans, but let me stop there and take some questions.