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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on arrival at the Foreign Affairs Council

"Good morning!

Today's Foreign Affairs Council will begin with a discussion about the situation in Syria, ongoing concerns for the poor people and the humanitarian crisis there, and the ongoing support for Lakhdar Brahimi and his attempts to try to move things forward. And the Member States will also want to discuss about the latest situation in terms of the removal of the chemical weapons.

I think the situation in Syria is absolutely appalling and every time we see the reports of the violence it is terrible and impossible to contemplate anything other than trying to push forward in finding a political settlement to this. I have been saying for three years we need to find a political way through this crisis. Lakhdar Brahimi has a very important role and while he is prepared to do that, we have to support him in everything he is seeking to achieve. And, you know, we just keep saying this not only to those who may share our views, but more importantly perhaps to those who don't.

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We will also talk about Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was recently there, we've been looking at the short and the medium term priorities; the kind of work that we can do to try and support especially young people in that country who are looking increasingly for greater economic support. Unemployment rates are above 50% for young people, as I was told by many members of civil society. We are looking at a kind of Compact for Growth and Jobs as well as ongoing efforts to move the country forward in its European perspective.

It is important that BiH implements the Sejdić-Finci ruling for the reasons that you know very well. It remains an important issue, but from my perspective it has always been about trying to get Bosnia and Herzegovina to tackle a whole range of issues at the same time, of which Constitutional reform and the Sejdić-Finci ruling is part. So, yes it is very important, but in the discussions that we have been having, we have been talking about the broader concepts, of a Compact for Jobs and Growth, how do we support the economy and how do we move this country forward.

But of course the main part of our discussions this afternoon will be on the situation in Ukraine. First of all, our growing concern about what Russia is doing, the reports coming out of the unrest in the Eastern part of Ukraine, trying to call for calm, trying to make sure that people can use democratic means to talk about the future of their country as we look to the presidential elections and beyond. We've seen the reports coming out of Ukraine of what the President is saying on the basis of looking at ways of engaging the East and engaging on the possibility of some kind of referendum. But we have to explore further with them what exactly they mean.

We are of course also looking at the meeting in Geneva on Thursday which I will attend on behalf of the European Union.

We have been in touch with Foreign Minister Lavrov two days ago to talk about this meeting and of course I am in touch with the United States and the Ukraine.

That meeting's purpose is to begin the conversation about how do we de-escalate the situation in Ukraine and how do we ensure that a sovereign state can go forward in the best interest of all of its people. It's absolutely vital that we find a suitable way through this, that is going to bring peace and stability to the whole country.

And that would be the objective of that meeting and I will be looking for endorsement from Foreign Ministers, if you like a mandate from all foreign ministers.

We will also touch on energy, an increasingly important issue, and we will be joined by Commissioner Oettinger for that part of the conversation.

And let me just say a word about Egypt. I am very pleased that the European Union is sending an electoral observation mission for the elections and I agreed that with Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy while I was there. I was only able to see one candidate because logistical reasons prevented me from doing any more than that, but I did spend some hours with Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and talked with him. My big message to Egypt is and always was

the same: this is a strong partnership; we want the people of Egypt to move forward, we do want these elections to herald the beginning of the next phase of life in Egypt.

But we are growing in our concern for what is happening in some aspects of Egypt and particularly and not surprisingly, I've focused on the death penalty that was handed out to over 500 people. Every interlocutor was at pains to say to me that this is not what they wanted to see and that it does not mean that this will happen. However we also pointed out in return that it sends out very negative signals. And we talked about journalists and other activists that are being held.

I hope that the next phase of life in Egypt is going to be very positive and it is very good for me to have the honour of meeting people across the spectrum.

Thanks, everyone!"
