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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton

following the Foreign Affairs Council

"We have had a long and very important Council meeting which began with discussion about the situation in Syria which I can only describe as appalling. We of course continue to support the efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi as he seeks to try moving forward in the political process. And we will continue in our diplomatic outreach on Syria, to ensure that all our partners remain engaged. We also want to insist that Security Council Resolution 2139 on humanitarian access should be fully implemented. This is part of the discussion that I have been having, as colleagues would know, in Egypt over the last few days as well.

We believe it is up to the regime to ensure tangible and long-lasting improvements in that situation, especially on humanitarian aid. We want to ensure that the deadline for destruction of chemical weapons is kept to the 30th of June. This is of extreme importance. And we also recognise the importance of support for the neighbours of Syria. We want to help them as they manage, looking after refugees, and will continue with our aim in giving support to those countries as well as to the internally displaced people in Syria.

We also discussed the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the socio-economic as well as political challenges they are facing. The first responsibility to deal with them lies with the leadership of the country and we call upon them to provide concrete and quick answers to the legitimate concerns and aspirations of the people. Ahead of October elections, more, not less, needs to be done.

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In the short term it is important for the institutions and leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina to focus on a number of key priorities, particularly socio-economic issues and especially high unemployment among young people. We are ready to support the efforts they make through a number of initiatives, including the Compact for Growth. This is an effort coordinated with international partners to assist the institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in reforming the economy and creating new opportunities for citizens. After the elections, they will need to engage on a broader set of issues. The efficiency and the functionality of institutions need to improve at all levels. We, of course, remain committed to their European perspective. But work needs to step up to regain some positive momentum and we will continue with our efforts to help and support.

The extremely worrying situation in Ukraine was at the top of our agenda today. We condemn unreservedly the actions by armed individuals in the cities of Eastern Ukraine. These attempts at destabilising Ukraine must stop.

We strongly support the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. We call upon Russia to do so as well and to pull back its troops from the Ukrainian border. Any further actions aimed at destabilising Ukraine have to stop.

In light of the latest events, we decided to expand the list of those subject to assets freeze and visa bans.

Utmost restraint is crucial and we commend the Ukrainian authorities for pursuing their law and order operations in a measured manner and we encourage the government in Kyiv to contribute further to reducing tensions.

Free and fair Presidential elections on 25 May are the best way to express the will of the citizens, as is the process of constitutional reform. We will continue to support the efforts to stabilise the situation in Ukraine economically, financially and politically. With this in mind, we have today approved two key measures in the package of proposals aimed at providing economic and financial support to Ukraine.

First, a decision providing up to €1bn in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine to support economic stabilisation and its structural reform agenda. Secondly, a regulation granting unilateral trade preferences to Ukraine. In the meantime, we will also look into a possible CSDP mission in the field of civilian security sector reform. And ministers have asked the European Commission to reply, on the basis of consultations with Member States, to the letter of President Putin on energy supplies.

We will also continue our diplomatic engagement to try to deescalate the crisis and stabilise the situation. It is crucial that Russia and Ukraine engage in a meaningful dialogue to find a political solution and we are ready to participate in the efforts to start this dialogue.

I am in regular touch with the foreign ministers of the United States, Russia and Ukraine and will meet them this Thursday in Geneva. The purpose of this meeting is to start a dialogue on how to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine and to ensure that peace and stability returns to the whole of Ukraine."