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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council

"Before the Foreign Affairs Council this morning we had the Ministerial Meeting with my Turkish counterparts which was a very useful meeting, where we were able to talk about not just the bilateral issues but also about many issues where we work closely with our colleagues in Turkey.

And the Foreign Affairs Council will be followed this evening by dinner of the EU ministers with foreign ministers of candidate countries, where we will be talking about Neighbourhood policy and some of the issues that have already been covered in discussions today.

At FAC today we began our discussions focusing on the Eastern Partnership and especially on the situation in Ukraine, where I was able to report back on my visit last week and the week before. And as you know, my colleague Štefan Füle has also been very actively involved in Ukraine.

We focused today on the need to continue to urge the dialogue between President Yanukovych and the opposition leaders. We're also working closely with civil society leaders who I've spent some time with talking about their issues and concerns - the importance of stopping any form of violence, bringing to justice those who have perpetrated that violence and moving forward to the work of the Parliament on constitutional reform which is a key part of trying to solve this crisis; and then onwards to free and fair elections.

Linked to that, the importance of supporting the economic challenges of the country requires reform, we've always said that, requires Ukraine to do a great deal, but I want to make sure that everyone understands that we are supportive in trying to ensure that the people of Ukraine go forward. The Council took on board all of these things and you will see this in the

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Conclusions that have been agreed, and colleagues are engaged very much in looking to help address these problems.

We also talked about what is happening in Bosnia Herzegovina right now. The first thing to say is the importance of ensuring that those who are protesting can do so peacefully and that any violence of any sort needs to stop. We have condemned already the violence that's taken place.

The most important thing now is for the leadership in BiH to take note of what people are saying and to respond to these immediate concerns, but also to the broader concerns that people have on economic issues, high levels of unemployment, concerns of young people, and to deal with some of the political issues that have long been on our agenda. We have great hope, we aspire to great things for BiH. We really do hope that they will deal with these concerns now and move forward and we stand ready to help in any way possible.

The Southern Neighbourhood is always on our agenda and we are very mindful that today Lakhdar Brahimi begins the second part of his discussions regarding Syria in Geneva. We wish him every possible success. And you have seen that Mr Brahimi has already focused in part on how to try and get agreement to enable people to be evacuated and for aid and support to go in. We are very concerned about the humanitarian situation in Syria which just gets worse. We are very concerned that ordinary people's lives are being drastically affected by this conflict and in our discussions we continue to try and support and urge that this dialogue turns into a real political process based on Geneva I that can in turn start to resolve this crisis.

I think in terms of the chemical weapons issue this was more a factual discussion, about the situation based on information that member states have and we have about the current situation there. What I would say is that this is really important that we see the commitments that have been made fulfilled. For all sorts of reasons it is absolutely vital that the Syrian government does stick to its commitments and we do see these weapons destroyed and got rid of.

We also talked as well about the success in Tunisia, about how Tunisia has moved forward. I was delighted that President Van Rompuy was able to be there on Friday and all colleagues joined in support of the work that is going on there, support of the EU's work in helping Tunisia. We also pointed to the importance of the conclusion of the dialogue in Yemen. And the importance too of helping to support that country as it moves forward.

Concern about the situation in Iraq is never far from our minds and a number of colleagues commented on the difficulties and challenges, especially on the security situation. We have had many discussions with the Iraqi authorities. You know they were here for the first meeting in the framework of our Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and we are always looking for ways in which we can try and support them working closely with the authorities and with the UN - for example Nikolai Mladenov, who until recently was a member of the FAC, and who is the UN representative - as we look towards the elections and we look towards trying to improve the security situation. So at the present time this is a discussion about how best we can help and support both as the EU and of course through the expertise and knowledge of the individual member states.

And then to Libya where we are looking forward to the conference in Rome in March but continuing to try and find ways to help, especially in the work we are doing on security sector reform.

We had an update too on the Central African Republic on all the work we are doing, also on the ground.

And just a word on the case of the two Italian marines - you know that I've raised this many times with the Indian authorities, most recently less than two weeks ago and we're very actively engaging with Italy on the ground. A lot of the work on this, you'll understand, is done quietly - for good reasons. What is concerning me most is that the legislation that appears to be used suggests that somehow this is about terrorism and this has enormous implications for Italy, but also enormous implications for all countries engaged in anti-piracy activities.

This was a point that I've made at the Foreign Affairs Council, as I do think colleagues need to now be very concerned because it changes the nature of this. Having said that, I've also made it clear to my dear friend Emma Bonino, to the Italian government, and to the members of the EU, that the EU remains very steadfast in our support to get this resolved in a straightforward manner quickly, and that two years is a very long time for us to see this drag on and that is the point I've made on numerous occasions.

Finally, on Switzerland - you'll see that both in the Commission and the Council people are considering how best we now move forward. The referendum result takes us in a particular direction. It's not a direction from the EU perspective that is easy, and we'll continue to talk with our Swiss colleagues about what we do next and how we go forward and I say no more about that now, because that's a discussion that is currently being debated.

Thank you."
