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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council, 18th November 2013

"Today, we had a number of issues on the agenda. Let me begin with the preparations for the Vilnius Summit for the Eastern Partnership, where we had an opportunity to look at how that is progressing. As you all know, the EU is committed to strengthening its relations with the partners in the East and we want this summit to be the summit of delivery.

We had a good political discussion today. I think it's fair to say that we are moving forward in the Eastern Partnership, that we have seen progress on quite a number of the benchmarks, especially in our discussions on Ukraine. We know that the Ukrainian Parliament will be discussing and hopefully adopting two main pieces of legislation identified in the benchmarks – one on parliamentary elections and one on the reform of the General Prosecutor's Office. That should take place sometime this week.

And on the outstanding case of selective justice, we believe it needs to be addressed and continue to support the efforts of President Cox and President Kwasniewski, in their mission which will continue.

I should also say that Commissioner Stefan Füle will travel to Kiev tomorrow on behalf of myself, as president of the Council, and on behalf of the President of the Commission.

We had the chance to talk about the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the on-going efforts to move forward with the Sejdic/Finci case.

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There was a lot of support for the work that is going on both from the Commission, especially Commissioner Füle, and from our special representative Peter Sørensen on the ground. We recognized that the key responsibility for progress lies with the political leaders of the country.

And we really urged them to seize the opportunity and benefit from what at the moment are quite positive regional dynamics. We don't want them to be left behind while others make significant strides on their European path.

We talked as well about our southern neighbourhood and a number of ministers joined me in being concerned about the deteriorating security situation in Libya.

We have representatives of the Libyan government here today, where we will have an opportunity to learn from them the situation and to underline our determination to continue to support Libya's transition to democracy.

Of course, we call on everyone to ensure that illegal actions do not prevent Libya's economic and political development, and we look forward to the drafting of a new constitution.

We talked about Syria and the deteriorating situation. There was a great deal of concern for the people inside, the refugees and displaced people there and also for the refugees and displaced people outside. We recognize the implications for the neighbours who are having to deal with a large numbers of refugees. And we are very worried that the winter is approaching and the potential for that to exacerbate the situation. A number of colleagues also raised the concern we have about the recent outbreak of polio.

We believe that there needs to be real access for health and humanitarian workers to reach people all around the country.

I have also said again today and repeated many times before that we recognize there has to be a negotiated settlement. We do continue to urge everyone to make what we have called Geneva II a reality as soon as possible.

I briefed Ministers too on the mission we had this week in Egypt, where we continue to review recent developments including the end of the state of emergency, and the potential, perhaps, for some form of reconciliation.

We will continue with the work that we have had on-going to support the people of Egypt to move back to a civilian government, to the elections that have been proposed for the spring and for later on next year. And we will continue to work closely with all.

We had the chance too, particularly in talking with our Italian colleagues, to consider the issue of illegal migration and the impact on countries around the Mediterranean.

Colleagues were especially interested in talking about the security implications of this, for the European Union. Everyone committed to continue to work on this, through the task force from the Commission and the work that went on in the Justice and Home Affairs Council

which I attended, together with the work that is going on to look at options for what we might be able to do in support of countries, but also to deal with some of the underlying issues that create the circumstances of people moving from their countries, sometimes being trafficked into very difficult circumstances such as those we saw in the Mediterranean.

And this afternoon we had a joint meeting between ministers of foreign affairs and ministers of defence ahead of December's European Council. So that we can get the setting right for the discussion at Heads of States and Governments level on common security and defence policy, setting both an agenda not only for the short term but also for the long term. Colleagues had the chance to look at the work that has gone on so far and to talk about the final report which I produced. I am glad to say that it was very warmly welcomed by Ministers.

Thank you".
