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S P E E C H

"Towards a global network of crisis rooms" by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the High-level Conference on Managing Complex International Crises

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure to see so many people here for this important event. When you look at what's happening across the world even if you were just observing from time to time, you can see that the number of serious international crises and the complexity of those crises is growing and changing and that the impact on many parts of the world is becoming more and more severe.

From Syria to the Philippines, Central African Republic, to events in Thailand - responding to crises has to be high on the agenda of every one who has responsibility for foreign and security policy at any given moment. It's certainly been very high on my agenda. In fact, the very first major challenge after I took office was the terrible earthquake in Haiti.

It's also where I met Agostino Miozzo, our Crisis Response Managing Director, who was operating in Haiti the best demonstration I've ever seen of bringing together all of the different people who need to engage in any form of crisis, from NGOs providing education or water or food or tents through to the military who were rebuilding schools, moving earth, moving rubble - all under the leadership of one man. And I determined on that day that one way or another I was going to steal him from the clutches of Italy and bring him here so that we could have these kind of discussions and these kind of events. And I will remain forever grateful to you for taking on what has been an extraordinary challenge, but a challenge that only you, in my view, could have succeeded in, as you have.

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And you helped me translate in a sense, all of those early experiences into the architecture for the External Action Service, not finished yet, but certainly work in progress with the creation of the Directorate of Crisis Response and Operational Coordination and of course your arrival as its first Managing Director.

It was really clear to me that in an interconnected world there is no major crisis anywhere that doesn't have repercussions everywhere, and certainly there is no crisis that does not affect the European Union and our worldwide network of political and economic partnerships. The European Union has a stake in international trade and security, citizens active all over the world at any given moment. So our procedures, our structures, need to be able to react and to respond to crises in the fastest and most efficient and most joined up way possible.

You know, we're also very conscious that the European Union is only one element of the answer to the challenges that are posed by any international crisis. Handling a complex situation will always need to be an effort of the international community at large. It will require working in close partnership, pooling our means, and coordinating our efforts.

So it's fantastic that today's and tomorrow's event will be looking at exactly that – how do we increase the coordination and effectiveness in crisis response? How do we network, partner, pool our resources more efficiently? Most of the work that I've ever done on tackling our response to crises I've done in partnership with others. I'm thrilled that so many of those partners are actually participating here today.

I think our international cooperation has gone from strength to strength, so it was wonderful to have the chance to inaugurate the League of Arab States' crisis room a year ago. And when I was in Asia to be able to talk about establishing a regional centre of information-sharing and early warning systems for those emergency situations, working with ASEAN, and supporting ASEAN in their centre for humanitarian response. It was wonderful to visit them and to see the office that we have in ASEAN being created.

I was also very pleased when I led the EU-Myanmar Task Force a few weeks ago to see the progress we're doing in creating a state of the art Crisis Response Centre in the country. Agostino, you were there, doing it for real, in front of me, making sure that these very effective people were very complimentary about the credibility, professionalism and policy of the staff, being able to work together to deal with and to operate in a way that was going to support response to crises. I know that there are Delegations here from both. I want to say how much we welcome your participation and how much we believe that you developed your work. We will have the opportunity to learn from you.

When you look at the challenges that we have in our time, climate change, terrorism, extremism, the natural and created crises of the twenty first century, there's no question that we have to tackle these through our cooperation with our partners, so the fundamental principle that we've established in the European Union in crisis response is that this is work to be done always in partnership with others.

We know that in dealing with a crisis reaction time can be of vital importance and again I know that today we'll be looking to address those questions. How can we improve the early warning capabilities that we have? How do we best coordinate our political and our operational reactions? How do we make sure we have the best access to the best information? And how do we share that information more effectively across organisations, across the world?

I also think it merits some reflection on how do we develop a structure that makes sure that we learn from the best practice that all of us have developed and therefore can make the best use of each other's experiences, too often experiences locked in an institution or even sometimes in a handful of individuals. We have to find better and smarter ways of sharing best practice and knowledge so that we can respond quicker and more effectively. We need to make sure too that we've got the complementary qualities of civilian staff and diplomats, and military strategists, putting them together to make the best possible use, mutually reinforcing each other.

I go back to Haiti briefly. Watching the way the military moved to provide hospital shifts, surgeons able to operate in difficult conditions, machinery to be able to move earth and rubble, but also to use naval resources to get round the island. Remember the roads were not passable for many days after the earthquake.

Each time we face some kind of crisis we have to look across the spectrum, not to underestimate the importance of humanitarian aid and support being seen as precisely that, and not mixed up in the political and the military, but working alongside and working in a coordinated way. I think that's going to be of enormous importance as we think through how to make that effective in the course of these two days.

And the idea, and in a sense, the title of the conference, Building a Global Network of Crisis Rooms, I think that's really worth exploring, because if we can find ways to link these different places through state of the art technologies, pulling expertise and strengths to be able to mutually reinforce early warning and crisis management capabilities, I think that would be a very worthwhile use of your time, which is always precious, I know.

We have to work for greater convergence of our long-term strategies to make sure that each of the different ways in which we operate across the world plays its part in contributing to long-term security and prosperity in any country or region. Crisis management and humanitarian aid cannot substitute for strategic vision on long-term action. They're very important but too often they can only deal with the symptoms whereas we need to think strategically about how can we deal with the causes. So defining that vision, focusing on crisis prevention, mobilising different strengths and capacities and working in partnership – these are the principles that I would argue are key policies in dealing with conflict and crises.

We sometimes call this the comprehensive approach – it means simply, bringing together all of the different policies, instruments - whatever you wish to call them – ways of operating in the world for a common purpose, and the common purpose is to try and ensure that you tackle issues and problems before they become the crisis that can so easily devour resources and create havoc and chaos for so many people across the world. So this approach is built on

the conviction that to be effective we need to join forces, pool our assets – those of the External Action Service, the Commission and Member States of course in the European Union. But complemented by the strong partnerships across the world, as I said, represented by so many people here today.

I wish you a very successful time here. I'm sorry I can't stay with you, but I know that this would be a really important two days as we seek to develop further and further how we respond effectively, how we work together strategically and how we help to support people all across the world that if a crisis should happen we are there to help and we're there fast.

Thank you"

