



EUROPEAN UNION

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Remarks by HR Catherine Ashton upon arrival to FAC, Brussels, 23 January 2012

Today we have a very busy Foreign Affairs Council as always, and the subject that will begin our deliberations will be Iran. We will be discussing and finalising additional sanctions with a particular focus on the Central Bank and on oil exports.

But I do want to reiterate that this is part of our twin track approach; the pressure of sanctions is designed to try and make sure that Iran takes seriously our request to come to the table and meet. You will know from everything I have been saying in the last weeks the importance we attach to them either coming back and discussing the issues we left on the table in Istanbul a year ago or indeed putting forward their own proposals.

Iran has the opportunity to come forward not just to talk, but to have some concrete issues to talk about. It is very important that it is not just about words; a meeting is not an excuse, a meeting is an opportunity and I hope that they will seize it.

We are also deeply concerned about the situation in Syria. I have just spoken with Nabil el Araby, the Secretary General of the Arab League, about the results of their meeting yesterday. You would have seen those results from Cairo. What is of particular significance is their approach that is reminiscent of the approach of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Yemen: looking to see the transfer to a Vice President, the appointment of an envoy - and Nabil is busy looking at how to achieve that - and also to seek support from the Security Council for the initiatives that they have taken. I've told Nabil we offer him full support. It's so important to see Arab leadership working hard now to try develop a plan which will stop the killings.

We call again and again for the violence to stop, for the monitors to be allowed to do their work unhindered, for them to be able to participate in support of the people and for everything that can be done to achieve a peaceful transition in that country.

Tomorrow I will go to the Middle East and meet Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lieberman, Palestinian President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad. We want to offer

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support to the King of Jordan for all the work that they are currently doing to try and support a peaceful solution, a two state solution, and I will be there to try and support that in every way that I can.

It is also important of course that we have in Egypt today the meeting of the People's Assembly. This is an historic moment and we look forward very much to seeing how today works out for everyone who is participating.

On Burma/Myanmar, we have seen quite extraordinary changes in the last weeks and months. I know colleagues who have already been there have experienced a real sense of transition in that country.

We are working closely with Aung San Suu Kyi and I will visit Burma in coordination with her, probably around April, after the elections. We offer full support in what we hope will be a very successful transition.

I think what's happening in Nigeria is truly awful. President Goodluck Jonathan is trying so hard to bring his country through to a peaceful time. You've seen that we've been putting out statements, that we've been working closely with our delegation there to see what more we can do. The persecution of religious minorities, anywhere, is wrong, fundamentally wrong. Freedom of religion and belief is absolutely a fundamental part of who we are as Europeans and we support that everywhere in the world.

Finally on the referendum in Croatia, I'm very pleased with the results and it will be a great delight to have the new Foreign Minister of Croatia sitting with us at our first Foreign Affairs Council to join the 27. It's called observer status, but I very much hope that we will see Croatia participating as we move forward.
