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**Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
on the latest developments in Turkey, European Parliament,
Strasbourg**

President, distinguished members of the European Parliament. Last night, Turkish police launched a major offensive to remove protestors from Taksim Square in Istanbul. There was intensive use of water cannon and tear gas. There were violent scenes in Ankara and Izmir too. There are reports of widespread injuries. Once again, police tactics are a major cause of concern.

I have followed events closely from the start. I have issued two statements, through my spokesperson on 2 June, and directly myself on 9 June. Last night I spoke with Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. Throughout, I have coordinated closely with Commissioner Füle who was in Turkey last week, meeting with both the Prime Minister as well as civil society representatives.

We have seen too many examples of excessive police force over the past two weeks - close range use of tear gas, water cannons, pepper spray, plastic bullets – against protestors who have been overwhelmingly peaceful.

Several thousand have been injured, tens of them severely; some have lost their sight due to excessive use of tear gas and pepper spray. And at least 3 have died. For their families, a serious situation has become a tragedy. I express again on behalf of myself, Štefan Füle and you deep sympathies to the bereaved and injured.

I have been very clear in my statements – and I repeat again – that excessive use of force by members of the police against peaceful demonstrators must be swiftly and thoroughly investigated, and those responsible held accountable.

The environmental concerns of the initial demonstrators have developed into the wider concerns of a significant portion of society who feel their voice is not heard in Turkish politics today. There is a real polarization of opinion. Major AKP rallies in Istanbul and Ankara this weekend would risk

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adding to the tension when we need to see a de-escalation. The answer, I believe, and as I have said, is engagement, not antagonism.

President Gül's call for peace and dialogue has been an important voice of moderation. Deputy Prime Minister Arinc has met union leaders and representatives of the protestors, and promised that lessons will be learned about the need for greater public dialogue in future. Prime Minister Erdoğan is due to meet representatives of the protestors today. This is an important opportunity to find a way forward based on dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect.

We know that Turkey, as a candidate country, needs to aspire to the highest possible democratic standards and practices. These include the freedom to express opinion and assemble peacefully, freedom of the media, and freedom of religion, belief and thought. Democratically elected governments – even the most successful of them, which have enjoyed three election victories and have half the population's support – still need to take account of the needs and expectations of those who don't feel represented. And peaceful demonstrations are a legitimate way for such groups to express their views.

I have also been surprised by the initially sparse domestic media coverage given to the demonstrations in Turkey; and by attempts to condemn and restrict the use of social media, which has been the prime form of communication throughout. Freedom of the media is a concern in Turkey.

It is right that the EU should champion it as a channel to exercise freedom of speech. Social media, too, should not be seen primarily as a source of problems, but as a valuable conduit for communication, legitimate protest and dialogue.

This is an important moment for Turkey. A chance for it to renew its commitment to European values. To embrace a culture which values diverse opinion, different lifestyles, and open debate. Turkey's reforms over these past years have already been truly impressive. And let's remember that it is this Turkish Government that has shown statesmanship, vision and bravery in embarking on a peace process to resolve the Kurdish question.

I am convinced it can meet this challenge too, and use this moment to take further steps forward in expanding fundamental rights and freedoms.

This is not the moment to disengage from Turkey but to engage more closely. And for Turkey to engage more closely with the EU too. My own foreign policy dialogue with Turkey is increasingly close and fruitful. I visited Ankara in April. President Van Rompuy in May. Our dialogue at the highest level must be kept up, all the more so when times are challenging.

Last December's Council stressed the importance of active and credible accession negotiations, and the need for those negotiations to regain momentum. We are on course to open a new negotiating chapter this month, and are within reach of a new visa dialogue and the signature of the readmission agreements. In light of current events, we should engage with Turkey more on those negotiating chapters most fundamental to its reform efforts.

Our relationship with Turkey gives us a unique opportunity to influence - if we use it. We need to make the most of all the tools we have. And, of course, Turkey needs to work with us. It is clear to me that the case for engagement is doubly compelling now.