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Remarks by the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the Senior officials' meeting on Egypt and Tunisia¹

Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, made today the following remarks:

"Welcome all.

I am pleased so many have come. Some of you have travelled a great distance. All of you represent countries and organisations that have a key stake in how we can best support the momentous changes that are sweeping through Tunisia, Egypt and beyond.

Over the last few weeks we have all watched events in Tunisia and Egypt unfold. Across the Arab world we see populations demonstrating their desire for change; to shape their own lives, politically and economically. The scale and consequences of these changes are historic. We must ensure that our response is on a similar historic scale.

Our focus today is Tunisia and Egypt. But we are extremely concerned about developments in Libya, where we face an unacceptable situation with violent attacks against peaceful protesters. Gaddafi's defiant speech yesterday has only raised our concerns. We welcome and fully agree with the statement of the UN Security Council with its firm condemnation of the violence, its rejection of the on-going repression and its call for those responsible to be held to account.

I was in Cairo yesterday and visited Tunisia last week. My trips to the region have confirmed my belief that we should offer help but not to dictate outcomes or impose solutions. As international community we will accompany the transformation if our help is welcome. But the future lies firmly in the hands of the Tunisian and Egyptian people. They own their revolution and rightly so.

During my visits I had meetings with the transitional governments, as well as opposition groups, civil society and the young. These meetings have confirmed that we face a 3-fold challenge and need to put together a 3-fold response:

¹ check against delivery

P R E S S

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We need to help build what I call deep democracy (political reform, elections, institution building, fight against corruption, independent judiciary and support to civil society). Where relevant, we can draw on our own history of building democracy and reconciliation including from those among us that have gone through these transitions recently.

We also need to work on economic development. We are dealing with extremely young populations, with high unemployment; a lack of opportunities and significant social imbalances. Egypt, for instance, is both bigger and poorer than most other Arab states with around 40% of its population living on less than 2USD/day. Although in recent years the general macroeconomic situation and the growth figures have improved, this has not yet trickled down to the lower-income households which have also suffered from rising food-prices and sharper competition for secure jobs in the context of a growing labour force and insufficient employment opportunities. To address these economic challenges we will have to consider market access and trade measures; big infrastructure projects (water, transport, energy) as well as wider financial assistance which must be well-coordinated to be efficient and effective.

Third we have to consider what we can do to facilitate people to people contacts, exchanges and mobility while avoiding uncontrolled migration flows.

The key point of this meeting is to discuss how we can best respond collectively, in a coordinated manner. The needs for assistance are vast and all in this room are committed to offer our support. But we need a common understanding of what the needs are and who is best placed to do what; to maximise our collective impact.

The situation is in flux across the region. We cannot know for sure how things will unfold. But we do know several things that could guide our collective response:

First, we know that we need the right blend of democratic and economic reforms to build sustainable stability. Events in the region show that the "old stability" wasn't working. That is why we need to build a new "sustainable stability". This will require us to tackle the political and economic aspects in an integrated manner. What these last few weeks have shown us is that political and economic reforms must go hand-in-hand. Populations are striving for political rights and freedoms, accountability and participation.

But they also strive for economic freedom; job opportunities; an end to corruption and a better future for their children. That is why I am pleased that we have several multilateral banks present today – and I am keen to hear their assessments on the nature economic challenges and what can be done in what sort of timeframe to make a difference.

Second, we know that we as European Union must respond with determination to fully support the aspirations of the people of the Southern Mediterranean and their hopes for democratic change, social justice and democratic development.

We have said that we are ready to offer our support to the countries of the region, providing more effective support on the basis of shared principles, collaboration and local ownership.

One big part of this is a fundamental review of our Neighbourhood Policy. This morning I was discussing with fellow Commissioners how revamp and renew the Neighbourhood Policy in light of the new challenges we face.

Making it more ambitious and more political. With a greater focus on institution building and civil society. What I call "deep democracy". With more differentiation and positive conditionality or "more for more": those that go further and faster with reforms will be able to count on greater support from the EU.

Third, we know that local ownership is key. These transitions – how they will unfold, at what speed, leading to what kind of new political and economic dispensation – are and have to be led by the citizens of Tunisia and Egypt. Our role is perhaps to be modest but offer steadfast support, with everything we have got. Supporting pluralism and inclusiveness, not dictate outcomes or impose solutions.

This meeting is crucial. Bringing together the major international stakeholders in what is a great endeavour. The countries and international institutions present in this room are all important partners for Egypt and Tunisia.

I hope this afternoon we can have an open discussion. What have to avoid is to overlap and overload. What we can achieve is getting a shared political understanding of what lasting success in the democratic transitions requires and how different international actors can best contribute in a coordinated manner."
