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EUROPEAN UNION

Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Informal Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers (Gymnich)

Can I begin by thanking you, Erato, and your team for the wonderful organization of the Gymnich here. It's been a great pleasure to be here, this is a beautiful place to be! We of course had some serious and very important conversations.

Not surprisingly we've been focusing on the ongoing tragedy in Syria. I've made it very clear before, it was very clear again from all of our discussions today, that we are adamant Assad should go and that we need to see the political transition to inclusive democracy. Colleagues and I were very clear about the inclusive nature of what needs to happen for the people of Syria and the future.

For us, of course, the humanitarian crisis is an absolute priority, but we are working on a number of different tracks: political, diplomatic, humanitarian and support for the opposition groups to come together and to work on a viable plan for the future.

We're also discussing with the neighbouring countries - Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey - about the influx of refugees. The numbers are increasing quite dramatically, we have about 230 000 refugees that came across the borders, and we announced yesterday an extra 50 million euros in humanitarian aid which will go to support people within Syria and those who are coming across the borders.

We particularly focused on the importance of support for the Special Representative Brahimi and his search for a peaceful political solution to the crisis. I mentioned before that I had a long conversation with him and I will meet him in New York. We still have people in Damascus, we offered support to him as he considers how to move forward.

And of course to recognize that the inability of the UN Security Council to move forward means that the pressure is on all of us to try and respond in a coherent way to the issues of greatest concern. And as I've said, this is about pushing forward diplomatically, pushing forward in the humanitarian support, working with the opposition parties and promoting above everything an inclusive support for the people of Syria.

P R E S S

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We also yesterday had an in-depth discussion on the situation with Iran and I briefed Ministers on the work that has been going on since we had our last round of talks in Moscow. I had a long telephone discussion with Dr Jalili who leads the negotiations for Iran during August and we will make further contacts and the E3+3 will meet in New York to take things forward. But as always, I urged Iran to seriously look at the proposals that have been put forward and to engage with us to recognize that as they keep saying they want to be clear that they do not seek a military option in terms of their nuclear programme and to demonstrate the truly peaceful nature of that programme by all that they do.

But I said when I arrived here that the great thing about the Gymnich, the reason it was invented, was the opportunity for Ministers to be able to talk most strategically, to deal with the immediate but also to have a chance to think about longer term issues. I've been very clear that for the coming two years of this mandate it is important that we develop a strong approach to what we call horizontal issues. These issues are not about geography but are about challenges that are faced across the world.

We chose for this particular discussion to focus on two: The first was water, where as many of you know, so many parts of the world face real challenges either because of climate change which results in flood or drought, or because of the quality of water available for people which is insufficient quality for their needs, or because of the challenges of many countries sharing water resources and the impact of changes that might take place in how people use water. So we had a broad discussion on this from which it was very clear that all the Ministers were united in the view that the EU should do as much as it possibly can to support the provision of water and to look at these issues from that broader horizontal perspective.

It's also important that in the post-Lisbon world we work with our colleagues in the Commission, in my role as Vice President, across the different areas in order to ensure that we are responding to these important challenges which include of course the potential for conflict because of the lack of water, of the needs of water.

And we also looked at education, the vital importance of education in support of especially but not exclusively young people, thinking about their access to education, thinking about the work forces of the future and thinking perhaps especially and not surprisingly about the countries going through transition and change. In the context of the latter we looked at the way in which we are supporting scholarships, supporting institutions of the European Union offering education, occasional education and training as higher education has been a very important part of the offer that the European Union makes to those countries.

And not surprisingly again we focused on making sure that girls have access to education and the importance of ensuring that in countries across the world that is not taken away, that it is not denied and that it is understood that as well as being inherently and morally right that girls should be educated, it is also about ensuring that these highly creative entrepreneurial girls take their place in supporting the economic growth and development of their own countries and beyond.

That's a sort of synopsis of what we dealt with.
