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Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the High Level Roundtable Discussion on Water, Peace and Security, New York, 25 September 2012

It is a great pleasure to be here today and I would like to thank our partners, the US and the UN and Secretary of State Clinton for this important initiative and all of you for kindly accepting our invitation.

Water is a major strategic challenge of growing concern and with potentially far reaching consequences. It is closely linked to food security, to energy security, to economic and social development. Increased water shortages, poor water quality, droughts or floods accentuated by climate change, shifting economics and demographics can be destabilising factors for peace and security.

The challenges this creates are in terms of economic viability and part of the challenges of peace and security. I think we have to step up our engagement on water security. And this meeting, I hope, is a real contribution in that direction.

From the European Union we have had a long and substantive commitment through the development cooperation assistance that we have. We've spent about €2 billion in sixty countries since 2008 on issues to do with water and sanitation. We have longstanding cooperation with many of the partners who are represented here. Can I say that we are determined to remain engaged and committed and we are very pleased that water got proper attention at the Rio+20 summit; an extremely important meeting, from which we now need to move to implementation, as we've just been discussing.

P R E S S

FOR FURTHER DETAILS:

Michael Mann +32 498 999 780 - +32 2 299 97 80 - Michael.Mann@eeas.europa.eu

Maja Kocijancic +32 498 984 425 - +32 2 298 65 70 - Maja.Kocijancic@ec.europa.eu

Sebastien Brabant +32 460 75 09 98 - Sebastien.Brabant@ec.europa.eu

COMM-SPP-HRVP-ASHTON@ec.europa.eu

www.eeas.europa.eu

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We know that the issues of water security are often across regions. Related to the issue of trans-boundary management and cooperation, it is also an area of potential risk of conflict. When the foreign ministers of the European Union met in Cyprus, we had a really good and very important consultation on water security. I was trying to make sure that within the European Union we seriously thought about how this issue, and every aspect of it, was covered in the foreign policy work we do, and in my work as Vice President of the Commission, what we do across the Union. And I have to say it is very obvious from our discussions with foreign ministers that this is a real key preoccupation as we think about the challenges in different regions of the world and the potential for conflict or for other forms of difficulty created.

We need to promote the collaborative management of this resource. It is going to be very important for sustainable development, it's going to be extremely important to tackle climate change issues and it's going to be enormously important for stability in many parts of the world. And in some senses, we in the European Union are inspired by our own experiences on having to develop regional cooperation and collaborative arrangements in our own continent; an obvious example is around the Danube. So we would also suggest that we have great experience and some expertise to offer in this sphere. And that's partly why we are already engaged in many areas around the world where we are promoting the trans-boundary and regional cooperation on water resources. For example in our work in Central Asia, and our Special Representative for that part of the world is with us today. I'll be visiting the region shortly and that will be one important part of our discussions today when we have the EU-Central Asia Ministerial meeting.

And finally all of these efforts can be complimented by supporting what we already have internationally; we have the 1992 and 1997 water conventions, which we fully support. And it is important to build on that work that is ongoing through those conventions in everything that we do.

We are convinced that water security is one of the major security challenges of our time. I hope that in the course of this meeting there will be an opportunity to identify some of the priorities and some of the next steps that we need to take and how we can work together. So I hope you won't mind if I say that I see this meeting as just the beginning and I certainly want to personally engage on this issue both with all of you through the European Union; in looking at what further we can do together.

So let's hope that from this meeting we can explore more of the political awareness we need to have, how we can enhance our partnerships and how we, more than anything, promote sustainable solutions to enhancing water security across the world.

Thank you.

For more information:

Fact Sheet: European Union and Water Security
http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/en/article_12623_en.htm