



EUROPEAN UNION

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## Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the current situation in Egypt

Honourable members,

Since we last discussed the Egypt many challenges have emerged for the Government and for the people.

There is clearly a serious political divide in the country between the government and the main opposition - the National Salvation Front. We have also seen demonstrations and violent clashes across the country.

We urge calm. We urge restraint. We urge dialogue.

The referendum and adoption of the constitution have not led to a great sense of direction with a low turnout of 33%.

And the country is facing huge economic challenges with a 12-13% budget deficit. The IMF has already identified a 14 billion dollar funding gap.

This is the issue more than any other that is immediate and needs our engagement, notwithstanding the political challenges the country faces.

More than ever, Europe as a neighbour and a partner has to engage and support Egypt's democratic transition.

EUSR Bernardino Leon has spent a month of shuttle-diplomacy to Cairo to meet with the government, Presidency and the whole political opposition on my behalf in order to build confidence and to look for common ground on political and economic issues.

Together with the other members of the international community we will continue to push for the finalization of the IMF arrangement, which will allow the EU to mobilize macro-financial assistance of 500 million euro.

## P R E S S

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In parallel, we will also have to discuss means on how best to mobilise our existing financial assistance in a timely fashion and I would ask for your support and commitment for this undertaking.

Democracy building is not a 'quick fix'. The building of deep and sustainable democracy is a long process which requires hard work, commitment, - as well as patience - domestically and internationally.

The fact that we do have 'an opposition' in Egypt is in itself a democratic achievement. That Egypt had peaceful and fair Presidential elections is another and so is Egypt's formal invitation to the EU to observe the upcoming parliamentary elections.

These were due to start on 22 April. President Morsi has accepted the Administrative Court ruling to refer the electoral law to the Supreme Constitutional Court. I believe this was a wise decision.

This will likely postpone the elections giving more time to reach agreement on the outstanding issues.

In this very tense political context elections must be held in conformity with the constitution and in a peaceful, inclusive and transparent manner.

We know that going to the polls to vote is very important but is , only one component of democracy building.

Another is the importance of working with all sides in order to build bridges and promote reconciliation, to respect and safeguard the fundamental human rights of all citizens, whether they are "winners" or "losers".

Egyptians are openly debating human rights issues in public, in political circles, in the media, and at the Shura Council. I welcome that debate. We share many concerns and want to see real progress in these areas.

The EUSR for Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis, visited Egypt in mid-February and met with institutional as well as with civil society interlocutors.

He conveyed the messages of particular concern we have: on police abuse, torture, and impunity, freedom of expression and belief, women's rights, working conditions for NGOs, and the promotion of economic and social rights.

We have stressed the importance of ensuring a favorable environment for civil society and encouraged the adoption of a new NGO law that ensures NGO transparency while respecting the independence of Civil Society from government control, that eliminates burdensome registration procedures, that does not subject NGO activities to prior government approval on the basis of their alleged "usefulness to society," and that does not limit or demonize NGO funding.

I am pleased that the Egyptian authorities have shown willingness to engage and have requested through our special representative to whom I pay tribute for the work that he has done on this, EU assistance and expertise on the NGO law.

The situation of women in Egypt is of great concern, in particular violence and other forms of harassment. We are funding a €4 million euro project -with UN women- on women empowerment.

Last weekend Helga Schmidt, our Political Director has been in Egypt meeting with the women with whom we have been engaging over the last two years. We are concerned about the stories that they gave us of the harassment that they are facing. We are continuing to support the National Council for Women which is currently in the process of drafting a national strategy for combating violence against women as a basis for a comprehensive law.

Last week, another important event took place in the relations between the EU and Egypt: the resumption of the formal dialogue under the EU-Egypt Association Agreement that has been postponed since the uprising in 2011.

Following the commitment of President Morsi during his visit to Brussels in September last year to relaunch the process and following the Task Force meeting in November, an Association Committee at senior officials' level was held in Cairo on 28 February.

we raised our concerns related to human rights, on the need to build a political consensus building and the establishment of a conducive business environment. Egypt focused on asset recovery and the EU financial package.

We are all aware of the consequences of an economic collapse that would be devastating. Europe cannot allow or afford this happening and we have to approach the problem in a constructive and timely manner.

While we have to show 'strategic patience' with the political development in the country, we will not remain silent on issues like fundamental freedoms and human rights, at the same time we have to help meet the socio-economic expectations, both the goals of the revolution and the aspirations of the Egyptian people.

More globally, we of course need to support Egypt's efforts as a regional power, be it in its involvement in the League of Arab States; its attempts to bring together regional powers in the search of a political solution to the Syria crisis; the brokering of the Gaza ceasefire; and its continued effort on Palestinian reconciliation.

Mr President this is a very difficult time for Egypt. As I have indicated there are challenges that need to be faced. I believe the EU has an incredibly important role to play in that. We are determined to play it. To be a friend and partner but also to be a critical friend in times that are extremely difficult for the people of Egypt right now.