



EUROPEAN UNION

Vilnius, 7 September 2013
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**Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
following the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers,
Vilnius, 7 September 2013**

"Can I begin by thanking Linas, the Lithuanian government and people for their incredible hospitality. They hosted foreign ministers, defence ministers, and parliamentarians in the space of the last three days and have done it with enormous grace and of course made sure that the weather works for us too.

We began discussions at the Gymnich on our Common Security and Defence Policy in preparation for the report that I will submit to the summit in December. That was building on a very productive meeting of EU Ministers of Defence who met here on Thursday and Friday morning. There was a great deal of welcome for the interim report which I can now finalise and submit to EU leaders. We also had the opportunity to look at the Commission's communication on defence and to discuss our recent operations. I really hope we will get strong support from EU leaders as we move forward on our Common Security and Defence Policy, when they meet in December to discuss this.

We then moved on to the preparations for November's summit in Vilnius with the countries of the Eastern Partnership. There is obviously a lot of work to be done in the lead-up to the summit. We want to ensure that our partners show that they can deliver on their commitments to reform but we also have to recognize that they face huge pressure. If we succeed, the Association Agreements, with the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, will give our partners the framework that they need for the transformation that they wish to see. In the rule of law, democracy, human rights, as well as much better access to the biggest market in the world. That will be of benefit to all of us.

P R E S S

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You will know that this morning we were joined by Secretary of State John Kerry. It was a delight to welcome him here to Vilnius. We had a number of discussions but I wanted, following the conclusion of his discussions with us and then our own talks at the Gymnich, to read out to you a statement that I want to make, which reflects the agreed position of the European Union, reflects the position agreed by all Member States. It will be available to you shortly."

- On 21 August, a large-scale chemical attack was perpetrated in the outskirts of Damascus, killing hundreds of people, including many women and children. That attack constituted a blatant violation of international law, a war crime, and a crime against humanity. We were unanimous in condemning in the strongest terms this horrific attack.
- Information from a wide variety of sources confirms the existence of such an attack. It seems to indicate strong evidence that the Syrian regime is responsible for these attacks as it is the only one that possesses chemical weapons agents and means of their delivery in a sufficient quantity.
- In the face of this cynical use of chemical weapons, the international community cannot remain idle. A clear and strong response is crucial to make clear that such crimes are unacceptable and that there can be no impunity. We must prevent creating a dreadful precedent for the use of chemical weapons in Syria again, or elsewhere.
- The EU underscores at the same time the need to move forward with addressing the Syrian crisis through the UN process. We note the on-going UN investigation on the 21st of August attack and further investigations on other chemical weapons attacks carried out in this conflict. It hopes a preliminary report of this first investigation can be released as soon as possible and welcomes President Hollande's statement to wait for this report before any further action. The EU urges the UN Security Council to unite in its efforts to prevent any further chemical attack. To that effect, it encourages the UNSC to fulfil its responsibilities and take all initiatives to achieve this goal. The EU and its member states intend to play a full and active part in that context.
- The EU recalls the individual responsibility of the perpetrators of attacks of this type, who must be held accountable, and the role of the ICC in investigating and judging such acts.
- Only a political solution that will result in a united, inclusive and democratic Syria can end the terrible bloodshed, grave violations of human rights and the far-reaching destruction of Syria. An encompassing diplomatic process leading to a political solution is now more urgent than ever. The initiative for a "Geneva II" peace conference must move ahead swiftly. The EU is ready to provide all support needed to achieve a political settlement and work with partners and international actors, particularly the United Nations.
- The EU will uphold its commitment, as the largest donor, to provide aid and assistance to those in need due to the Syrian conflict. It will maintain its readiness to help the recovery, rehabilitation and transition in Syria, in accordance with the needs of the Syrian people.