



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Brussels, 12 February 2014

6471/14

**PE 78
PESC 147
BUDGET 6
CULT 20
COMEM 33
COASI 27
CSDP/PSDC 83
TU 6
ELARG 13
COEST 42
COHOM 29**

NOTE

from: General Secretariat of the Council
to: Delegations

Subject: Summary record of the meeting of the European Parliament **Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET)** held in Brussels on 10 and 11 February 2014
Chair: Mr Brok (EPP, DE)

Shorter meeting than usual but with a few unexpected events, notably the rejection of a report drafted by an EPP MEP and the postponement of a vote on another report because of last-minute suspicions of possible misinterpretation by anti-European parties. Debriefing of the FAC by the High Representative with the focus on Ukraine and Bosnia.

I. Debriefing by Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Foreign Affairs Council of 10 February 2014

The High Representative delivered the speech in the Annex.

Many questions focused on Ukraine. Mr SALAFRANCA (EPP, ES) wondered whether the EU was a facilitator or actually a mediator. Mr MEYER (GUE/NGL, ES) voiced his criticism of the EU's stance on Ukraine, considering that it amounted to interference and that it was up to Ukrainians to decide on their own future. The High Representative replied that the EU was not interfering but offering its support. The EU had been in contact with both sides and was ready to offer a different level of expertise depending on their needs and requests. This did not amount to meddling, she argued, but reflected the fact that the EU had some degree of responsibility if an offer - i.e. the association agreement and the DCFTA that it had made with Ukraine - sparked violence,.

Ms GOMES (S&D, PT), Ms NEYTS (ALDE, BL) and Mr HOWITT (S&D, UK) called for EU targeted sanctions. The High Representative said that the EU was focusing on positive action with a view to moving forward, but at the same time a clear message had been sent to the Ukrainian President and Government, i.e. that the EU was very much concerned and that no option was off the table.

Ms CRONBERG (Greens/EFA, FI) asked for clarification on the last sentence of the Council conclusions. The High Representative said that, despite the fact that Member States had different interpretations of what that sentence meant, there was unanimous agreement on the will to deepen EU-Ukraine relations.

Mr SALAFRANCA and Ms NEYTS asked what Lady Ashton thought of Ms Nuland's comments. She replied that that was a private conversation that someone had made public in order to cause a fuss.

Some of the questions raised concerned the CSDP. Ms GOMES feared that EUFOR CAR would become operational only after the genocide had already happened. Mr DANJEAN (EPP, FR) voiced similar concerns on the time needed for deployment. Ms GOMES also regretted that lack of coordination between the different missions of the EU and Member States in Libya and Mr DANJEAN added that as a result EU money for the mission was wasted. The High Representative hoped that EUFOR CAR could be deployed soon and said that the deployment of EU operations was naturally more complicated than for States that had troops at their disposal. On Libya, she acknowledged that coordination was never enough.

The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) worried many MEPs. Ms IBRISAGIC (EPP, SE) called for action before demonstrations could become ethnic in nature. Ms PACK (EPP, DE) also called for a tougher stance from the EU so as to change the situation in BiH. Mr PICULA (S&D, HR) regretted that BiH had been forgotten and called for a fast-track programme. For Mr KUKAN (EPP, SK) a strategy had to be unanimously adopted and "brutally implemented" in BiH. Along the same lines Mr KACIN (ALDE, SI) recalled that peace had been imposed in BiH and a solution had to be similarly imposed in the present situation, forcing local politicians to redress the country also in the economic area. The High Representative rejected any idea of an imposed solution, noting that the present situation could not be compared to Dayton. Now BiH had elected authorities and the responsibility to move the country forward fell on them. She said that for the time being there was no evidence of social unrest (due to the country's poor economic and social conditions) becoming an ethnic conflict but a clear message had to be sent to prevent such a development. She noted that the EU had put a lot of energy into the Sejdi/Finci issue and in showing BiH the progress that Serbia and Kosovo had made compared to BiH.

On the Swiss referendum, the High Representative said that Switzerland would now prepare a green paper on the implementation of its outcome and reiterated how crucial freedom of movement was for the EU.

On the Magnitsky case (Ms OJULAND (ALDE, EE)), the High Representative said that the EU had taken unprecedented steps and the EU position was well understood in Russia. Many options remained on the table, but some required unanimity among Member States.

Concerning the case of the Italian marines (Mr PANZERI (S&D, IT)), Lady Ashton said that it was disturbing and alarming not only for Italy but for the whole EU because of its implications (i.e. the accusation that Italy was a terrorist state).

II. Vote

a) The EU foreign policy in a world of cultural and religious differences

AFET/7/13699, 2013/2167(INI)

Rapporteur: Marietta GIANNAKOU (EPP, EL)

Responsible: AFET –

In the debate that preceded the vote, the rapporteur announced that 15 compromise amendments had been agreed upon by groups. On the 16th amendment- on violence against Christians - was rather controversial, notably because of opposition from the Liberals who did not want to single out the Christian minority. According to the rapporteur, S&D and the Greens could support this compromise amendment.

When put to a vote, the draft report was rejected, with 21 votes in favour, 26 against and one abstention. The rapporteur voiced her surprise since the shadow-rapporteurs had agreed to her draft text. The Chair saw a need for clarification between the shadows and their respective groups. Ms NICOLAU (ALDE, RO), shadow for her group, pointed out that her group's voting behaviour had been fair because she had announced that, if the compromise amendment was adopted - which was the case - her group would reject the whole report. Mr TANNOCK (ECR, UK) said that his group had also voted against but for a different reason, i.e. the adoption of Amendment 97 advocating the single permanent seat for the EU at the Security Council.

b) Discharge 2012: EU general budget - European External Action Service

AFET/7/14042, 2013/2205(DEC) COM(2013)0570[10] – C7-0282/2013

Rapporteur for the opinion: María MUÑIZ DE URQUIZA (S&D, ES)

Responsible: CONT – Tamás Deutsch (PPE, HU)

The draft opinion was adopted with 39 votes in favour, 3 against and 4 abstentions.

c) Discharge 2012: EU general budget - European Commission

AFET/7/13860, 2013/2195(DEC) COM(2013)0570[01] – C7-0273/2013

Rapporteur for the opinion: María MUÑIZ DE URQUIZA (S&D, ES)

Responsible: CONT – Markus Pieper (PPE, DE)

The draft opinion was adopted with 41 votes in favour and 5 abstentions.

d) Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the EEAS on the use of broadcasting media as a tool of EU diplomacy

AFET/7/13742, 2013/2187(INI)

Rapporteur: Sir Graham WATSON (ADLE, UK)

Responsible: AFET –

In the debate that preceded the vote, the rapporteur said that there was overwhelming agreement among groups on the need for an independent European broadcasting media which could promote EU values. A charter should include these values as well as the principle of the objectivity of information. Concerning Euronews, the rapporteur said that it had finally been agreed that it was better to reinforce its capabilities in Brussels rather than move its headquarters. Mr SALAFRANCA (EPP, ES), speaking on behalf of the shadow-rapporteur for the EPP, Mr PREDA (EPP, RO), expressed his group's support for the draft recommendation.

When put to a vote the following day, the rapporteur suggested changing the title of the report, from "the use of broadcasting media *as a tool of* EU diplomacy" into "the use of broadcasting media *in* EU diplomacy", so as to avoid any misunderstanding on possible use by the EU of broadcasting media for propaganda purposes. Ms PACK (EPP, DE) argued that even with that change, such a recommendation could be used against the EU, notably ahead of the European elections. She regretted that the CULT committee could not give an opinion and she called for the rejection of the recommendation. Mr PREDA, despite belonging to the same group as Ms PACK, disagreed with her. He considered that the draft on the table was a good compromise, the proposed Charter was not mandatory, the invitation to neutrality and objectivity could not be misinterpreted and the misuse of the recommendation by anti-European parties should not be feared. Mr BROK said he tended to agree with Mr PACK and announced that he would vote against the recommendation, firstly because journalists should not be neutral and secondly because the matter was one of national competences and the EP recommendation could be misinterpreted ahead of elections. He suggested postponing the vote. The rapporteur pointed out that all the shadow-rapporteurs had agreed on the text and that the recommendation was certainly not about EU propaganda. He called on those against the idea of a charter to vote against this specific provision, if needed, but he wanted his text to be adopted in the plenary before the end of the EP's term. He eventually agreed to postpone the vote in the committee. The S&D group also accepted to postpone.

e) **The EU comprehensive approach and its implications for the coherence of EU external action**

AFET/7/13289, 2013/2146(INI)

Rapporteur: Arnaud DANJEAN (EPP, FR)

Responsible: AFET –

This vote was postponed to 17 February.

f) Pakistan's regional role and political relations with the EU

AFET/7/13700, 2013/2168(INI)

Rapporteur: Boris ZALA (S&D, SK)

Responsible: AFET –

The draft report was adopted with 41 votes in favour, 1 against and 7 abstentions.

g) An anti-missile shield for Europe and its political and strategic implications

AFET/7/13425, 2013/2170(INI)

Rapporteur: Sampo TERHO (EFD, SK)

Responsible: AFET –

The draft report was adopted with 37 votes in favour, 8 against and 3 abstentions.

The Greens and the GUE/NGL group announced that they would draft a minority report.

III. Reports

a) 2013 progress report on Turkey

AFET/7/14495, 2013/2945(RSP)

Rapporteur: Ria OOMEN-RUIJTEN (EPP, NL)

Deadline for tabling amendments: 8 January 2014, 12.00

The rapporteur noted that there had been many (negative) developments since the first exchange of views in December. She considered that the Turkish government should refrain from interfering in judicial proceedings and make sure regulations were in line with the principles of the independence of the judiciary and the separation of powers. The recent law on the internet also raised serious concerns. On a positive note, she pointed out the negotiations had resumed the very same day on the Cyprus issue. She invited colleagues not to use her report to make the negotiations even more difficult than they already were.

The shadow-rapporteur for S&D, Mr OBIOLS (S&D, ES) supported the rapporteur's line and insisted on the importance of institutional and constitutional reform in Turkey. Mr LAMBSDORFF (ALDE, DE) focused on the need for Turkey to respect the rule of law (checks and balances, independence of the judiciary, freedom of expression, etc.), noting that democracy was more than elections.

The ECR group expressed different positions. Mr VAN ORDEN (ECR, UK) regretted that the Cyprus problem was not addressed in the right way and pointed out that a number of controversial areas remained, for instance those linked to WW I. Sir ATKINS (ECR, UK) argued that not only was Turkey not ready to join the EU (because of the deterioration of its democracy and its stance on Cyprus), but it was not willing to join either.

Mr TANNOCK (ECR, UK) also focused on problems in Turkey, including the violation of Christians' rights.

Greek and Cypriot MEPs challenged the rapporteur's line on the Cyprus issue. Mr HADJIGEORGIOU (GUE/NGL, CY) and Ms THEOCHAROUS (EPP, CY) regretted that no reference was made in the draft resolution to Turkish settlers in Cyprus and noted that Turkey had interpreted the joint declaration upon which negotiations had resumed in a very different manner from Cyprus. Both Mr HADJIGEORGIOU (GUE/NGL, CY) and Ms THEOCHAROUS (EPP, CY) together with Mr SALAVRAKOS (EFD, EL) and Mr SOPHOCLEOUS (S&D, CY), strongly disagreed with opening new chapters, whether 23-24 or 15. Ms GIANNAKOU (EPP, EL) reacted to Mr ATKINS by saying that Turkey still wanted to join the EU, but without changing the *status quo*.

The Commission's representative voiced EU concerns on the worrying developments in Turkey and considered that these were further arguments in favour of EU engagement. In particular he stressed that providing the benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24 would give Turkey a roadmap for reform and he regretted that the EU was not using this tool which had great potential.

The rapporteur concurred with this view. She also replied to Mr ATKINS saying that not only did Turkey still wish to become a EU member but that nobody had called for a stop to the negotiations. Despite her support for the content of some amendments on the reunification of Cyprus, she reiterated once again her request not to distort the balance in her report so as to allow the broadest possible consensus on the text of the resolution.

b) Recommendation to the Council on establishing common visa restrictions for Russian officials involved in the Sergei Magnitsky case

AFET/7/15148, 2014/2016(INI) B7-0473/2013

Rapporteur: Kristiina OJULAND (ADLE, EE)

Deadline for tabling amendments: 27 January 2014

The rapporteur regretted that the EP recommendation on this issue adopted in October 2012 had remained unanswered in the Council. Not only had this institution not adopted any sanctions, it had not even discussed the issue. In such circumstances, she felt that the EP should adopt a new recommendation, accompanied this time by a list - drawn up by the EP and mainly based on the US list - of those individuals that should be subject to sanctions.

The rapporteur received overwhelming support across the political spectrum. Mr TANNOCK (ECR, UK) acknowledged that the EP lacked any competence in this field but considered it important nonetheless to adopt this kind of recommendation.

The EEAS representative noted that the Magnitsky case was not the only case of a dysfunctional Russian judicial system. He pointed out that the EU had not remained silent on this issue: President van Rompuy had written a letter to the Russian authorities on the Magnitsky case - a unique example of a letter by the European Council's President focusing on a specific case. The High Representative had issued two statements voicing EU concerns. Finally the Magnitsky case was systematically raised in the framework of the human rights dialogue with Russia. The EEAS representative also stressed that sanctions were to be used as a last resort, their adoption required unanimity and could always be challenged before the EU courts (if annulled, they could be detrimental to the EU).

c) Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the European External Action Service on the EU strategy towards Iran.

AFET/7/15055, 2014/2009 (INI)

Rapporteur: María MUÑIZ DE URQUIZA (S&D, ES)

Deadline for tabling amendments: 18 February 2014, 12.00

Ms MUÑIZ (S&D, ES) pointed out that the Geneva agreement between the EU3+3 and Iran was Lady Ashton's first major success. Although there were no guarantees of a positive outcome, the agreement was a good starting point. She also recalled that the positive

development had started with the election of President Rouhani, who had broken Iran's isolation and put it back in the international community. On human rights, the rapporteur noted that the situation had improved slightly as far as political rights were concerned, but the use of the death penalty remained a major problem, as did violation of minority rights and LGBT's rights. Finally, she mentioned the role that Iran played on the international stage. She considered that her report should focus not only on controversial issues, but should also propose a positive agenda, for example in the field of drug trafficking or on cooperation to counter terrorism. She concluded by saying that the EU should not drop its guard and nor should dialogue and negotiations slow down either.

Ms CRONBERG (Greens/EFA, FI) welcomed the new developments in Iran and said that at the same time the EU should not shy away from areas of disagreement with Teheran. She also called for an EU representation in Iran.

Ms SCHAAKE (ALDE, NL) took a critical stance, pointing out the numerous problems in the field of human rights, as well as the destabilising impact of Iran in the region. She considered that the EU should contribute to empowering civil society and the private sector. It should also push for reform. Ms BELDER (EFD, NL) preferred an even harder line. He said that, despite the agreement, there were still a number of concerns on the nuclear issue. He rejected the rapporteur's interpretation of the role played by President Rouhani, pointing out that the human rights situation had worsened since his election. He considered that the West was playing a dangerous game with Iran and should prepare a plan B and keep the military option open.

In closing the debate the rapporteur acknowledged that there were no guarantees on Iran: it was a process that could evolve in either direction but at least now it had the merit of a changed pattern. This window of opportunity had to be taken, she also noted that this was in the interest of the EU (as some Member States were negatively affected by sanctions on oil, for example). She also reassured colleagues that she could not have made the human rights point stronger in her report. Taking into account the recently adopted EP report on Saudi Arabia, she considered that the EP now had to take a balanced approach on Iran, otherwise the risk would be to help the hardliners in Iran.

IV. Any other business

The Chair raised two issues under AOB: the outcome of the referendum in Switzerland and the situation in BiH.

On Switzerland, the Chair voiced his concerns on the consequences of the referendum introducing quotas on immigration from the EU citizens because it went against the principle of free movement of persons between the EU and Switzerland as enshrined in the bilateral agreement in place. However, at the same time he considered that it was up to Switzerland - not the EU - to come up with some proposals within three years.

Consequently, he advocated a "wait and see" approach and warned against getting too excited about the outcome of the referendum. He also considered that any abuse in the freedom of movement had to be prevented so as not to allow this argument to be used against the EU. Mr POSSELT (EPP, DE) agreed with this line, while Ms MUÑIZ (S&D, ES) and Mr KREISSLR-DÖRFLER (S&D, DE) considered that the EU had to react, that abuses could not justify putting principles into question and that three years was too long a time to wait. Sir ATKINS (ECR, UK) and Mr HOWITT (S&D, UK) warned that threatening Swiss people would be counterproductive. They pointed out that the decision had been taken through a democratic vote. Switzerland should rather be reminded that it had to respect its international obligations and, if it did not, it could no longer enjoy the rights provided for in its agreements with the EU. Mr BROK added that treaties had to be respected and, if one party did not respect its obligations, the other (the EU) would be allowed to do the same. Several proposals were put forward: asking the policy department to draft a note on the legal implications of the vote, setting up a dialogue with Swiss Members of Parliament and sending a delegation to Bern.

Ms PACK (EPP, ED) outlined the situation in BiH, where demonstrations had turned violent. She hinted at the population's frustration for the political and economic situation in the country but also to some inter-ethnic tensions. However, she wondered if these were honest demonstrations or if they were motivated by covert political interest; she therefore

advocated great caution. Mr STIER (EPP, HR) hoped that there would be no renewed conflict in the country and said that any form of radicalism had to be discouraged. Mr POSSELT considered that elections would not bring any solution and called on the EU to take a more proactive stance so as to avoid any risk of the situation escalating.

V. Next meeting(s)

- 17 February 2014, 15.00 – 18.30 (Brussels)

Brussels, 11 February 2014
140211/02

R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the AFET Committee, European Parliament Brussels, 11 February 2014

"Thank you Mr President, it's a pleasure to be back at the AFET Committee. I thought it would be valuable to give you a debrief on the Foreign Affairs Council yesterday, which covered a variety of topics. I'm always pleased to talk more generally, but it's always helpful if you can let me know the issues you're most concerned with and I'll make sure that you get proper replies.

For today let me start with as you did, Mr President, Bosnia and Herzegovina where I raised this issue as part of my introduction to the Foreign Affairs Council.

I think a number of things struck everyone, the first is that this was violent protest borne of frustration in the main because of the economic situation in Bosnia Herzegovina. Those of you following it closely will know unemployment rates are running at about 40%, huge numbers of unemployed young people and although we can never condone violence in any circumstances, it is very clear that there needs to be real leadership now, leadership that I think many of us who have been following the situation, not just in Sarajevo but beyond, have wanted to see really try and take the country forward.

If you look across the countries of that particular region, you'll see significant progress being made in their journey towards the European Union and in their response to the political and economic needs of their people. Bosnia Herzegovina seems to me to be stuck.

Great efforts we've made, and I pay tribute to my colleague Štefan Füle who has been doing a lot of work on the Sejdic/Finci case, but we need to do more and a number of discussions have been going on within the EU; with Member States, with the Services, with the Commission, and with our partners, not least the United States to see what further we might be able to do. We have a strong presence on the ground, real regional leadership. We met with candidate countries last night and this was one of our topics of conversation, but we need to do more.

We talked as well about the recent Summit with Russia and I gave a short debrief. We described the Summit as not 'business as usual'. There was a good and frank discussion with President Putin, most notably about our neighbourhood and differences were addressed in a frank and open manner, partly in a trilateral discussion between the three Presidents who sat together on their own and discussed openly and then in the slightly broader context of our discussions. We gave clear messages about our concerns.

The Russian President and his team also gave messages about some of the concerns that they have which led to the decision to hold some consultations at a technical level to explain in greater detail what the impact of some of the Agreements that we've been doing, especially the Free Trade Agreements with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, how this would be in our view of benefit to the economy of Russia and to try and prevent the further spread of misinformation.

I hope that we will also see the discussion on new agreements going forward in the future. We want to make sure that we have a strong bilateral relationship, a relationship based on mutual respect for the approach that we take and an understanding of the work that we're doing and the way in which we approach our relationships with sovereign states in our neighbourhood.

In the main part of the Foreign Affairs Council we had a long debate on the Eastern Partnership, to both do a stock take after the Vilnius Summit, and to focus on what's been happening in Ukraine. Mr President, you and I were both in Ukraine, representatives of the Parliament have been in Ukraine, Commissioner Füle and others will be going into Ukraine, but there is much to say about that.

And in the context of the post-Vilnius work, how to support Moldova and Georgia as we move forward with our ambition to sign those agreements, well before the end of this Commission. I think there were some lessons that we took away from the Vilnius summit. Not least the importance of retaining high level political engagement as we run up to the next summit in Riga and as we look beyond that summit.

We've asked for Ministers to be ready to make high level visits, both individually and in teams under the umbrella of the European Union. Ministers have often welcomed this kind of coordination and certainly did so on this occasion. We needed to continue to broaden our engagement with different groups and society, to combat misinformation about the nature of the agreements with the European Union, this is particularly important in Moldova right now. But that means parliamentarians, and I look to parliamentarians here, to help and support that work.

I think you have led on many occasions the outreach not just to Parliaments but also to civil society. But we need also to reach out to business, and to local regional authorities so that they too understand the benefits of these agreements and the potential for their business, for their economic activity and for society as a whole. We need to take these messages out and to use our Delegations to enhance what we call public diplomacy, countering some of the negative messages and to make sure that we intensify at the same time the dialogue with Russia. We talked as well and especially about the visits that I've made to Ukraine twice in the last ten days.

We have real concern, and I said this in all the press conferences. I was really shocked at the difference between my first visit in December and my second visit in terms of the tension and the numbers of police. When I went back last week the situation felt a little calmer, but all of you have been, I know, following the violence. I've met many people who have been victims of that violence and heard many, many stories from others and have got and collected a great number of testimonials, photographs and so on. It is also very clear, when you consider this violence, that there is not much being done to do the kind of independent investigation that we would all expect to see in a 21st century, European democratic country, to make sure that perpetrators of violence were brought to justice and that the government needed to understand, and I've told them this directly, that people believe they're doing this in their name and it's very important therefore that the government sends the strongest possible message.

We have to find a way to help de-escalate, we've offered expertise, advice, mediation, support of any kind with every Member State, with the European Parliament, with the Commission. We have experts that can do anything and what we don't have we can find. So there is no question but the EU together with colleagues in the Council of Europe, OSCE and elsewhere can offer that help and we have made that offer loudly and clearly to all.

We've also been engaged and I know you, Mr President, were involved directly in the Parliament in discussions about constitutional reform and the importance of going back to not just the 2004 constitution, but what we call "2004 plus" to take out elements of the 2004 constitution, for example those that give the prosecutor's office great powers. We need to resolve those issues as well as the ways in which the parliament could move in the short term and in the longer term both to deal with the immediate unrest and concerns that people have, particularly in Maidan but also with a longer term strategy to actually make sure that they have a stronger and better constitution, rebalancing power in a way that would help this situation. Again, we've offered to support and help that process.

We're looking at the amnesty law, there were four options on the table for the Parliament. The one they chose is the one they chose. And you will know that there are deadlines built into that which we're watching very carefully. And of course, free and fair elections at the end of this process, ensuring the capacity of all to have their voices heard and for those elections to be open.

I've also been talking, as you know, about the economic issues. When I went in December, I spent three and a half hours with the President to go through each aspect of the economic problems of the country: short, medium and long term. And I can tell you that in all the discussions I've had with the financial institutions, the Commission, Member States, other countries, it is clear that there is a capacity for us to be able to support and help what is clearly going to be a tremendous set of challenges in the economy in the coming weeks and months ahead.

But it doesn't come without reform. It comes because they choose to make the kind of economic reforms and changes that they need to in order to take the country forward. Whether that's reorganising industry so that it's more competitive, whether that's dealing with the short term problems that they have in terms of the budget deficit and so on. I will be going on Thursday to Washington, I have a meeting with Christine Lagarde and one of the subjects that we'll be discussing is Ukraine.

But Moldova and Georgia were also important and as I've said, looking to see that we had in place both the work that needs to get us to signature and work that needs to support them should they feel pressure as we move towards the signature of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA. I've mentioned already too, getting the information out about what this actually means for the people of these countries, for the governments, the opportunities it will bring, and we need to keep and sustain visits to these countries on a regular basis as we move towards that point.

Ministers wanted as well to discuss aspects of our Southern Neighbourhood and we discussed different countries in the context of the regional challenges that are being faced, so not surprisingly a lot of our thoughts were with Iraq and the terrible spiralling of violence that we have seen in recent weeks: the situation is very worrying. I speak regularly with Minister Zebari. He was very pleased to be in Brussels for the first meeting of the Association Council with them in the last few weeks but there are increasing concerns about what is happening in Iraq and of course Syria where today Lakhdar Brahimi continues his work to try and move forward with the discussions between opposition leaders and the regime.

As colleagues will know I was at Geneva I and I was at Geneva II. It is very clear that there is a strong political will from the international community to try and get these talks to move forward but it was also very clear that this is going to be extremely difficult. Both the rhetoric and the lack of understanding, in some ways, of what needs to be done, is still very present. We have to support Lakhdar Brahimi in what is an extraordinarily difficult job.

I also met with a group of Syrian women. Women of all faiths from different parts of Syria who have come together to try and develop their own response to this crisis and their own response to building the peace. It was a shame that there were not more women in the room in Geneva II, neither in the international community where I think Emma Bonino and I were the only two, nor indeed in the number of women represented in either delegation. There were some. And I do hope that we will see the women who have come together and started to do such great work and who I have asked to tell us what more we can do to support them play a stronger and bigger role in the future.

We have also been talking with Member States led by Luxembourg especially on the Security Council on the work they are doing to try and develop the humanitarian support that is going to be needed. And you will all be following the difficulties in New York in trying to get a resolution but also the practical ways in which we need to get this aid onto the ground and to the people. You will know too that we took a decision to make sure that funds that have been frozen in the EU can contribute to the Office of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons trust fund to help to try and support the removal and destruction of Syrian chemical weapons.

Colleagues, we talked about Lebanon as well, the need to move towards an effective government. The caretaker government has been in place for a long time and I met with the Prime Minister a number of times. There is a real aspiration in these next days and weeks that progress will happen and that they will build towards the Presidential elections. But of course 25% plus of the population of Lebanon is made up of refugees from Syria. They do a great job but it is very, very fragile and we have to remind ourselves of the importance of continuing to support the people of Lebanon as they struggle with not only their own challenges but beyond that.

We had conclusions on Egypt. The third anniversary of the Egyptian revolution has just happened, there is a new constitution. We have noted how difficult the situation is and the worsening situation in many respects. A lot of people who have been arrested who shouldn't been in prison but our concern is equally for the growing amounts of violence and acts of terrorism which we condemn completely.

Continuing our engagement in the whole region in human rights in Egypt and all of the countries of the region and I want to pay tribute to Stavros Lambrinidis for his work in doing that and also to Bernardino Leon for his work in helping to, not least, get the agreement that's been so important in Tunisia. He played an extraordinary role in achieving that. And discussions too about the situation in Libya, where there is great instability and concerns that all the efforts that we are making on security sector reform are very difficult to implement in a situation that is so unstable.

Finally on the neighbourhood, discussion about Yemen, where we adopted conclusions which welcomed the outcome of the national dialogue conference. It is good to have stories that show that it is possible through dialogue to make change, to countries moving, although fragile, moving forward. And I think that is particularly true in Yemen. But there's much to do in underpinning the economic and social conditions.

And very finally, we talked briefly about the Central African Republic as we prepare for the mission. We have Major General Philippe Pontières, who is the operation commander. He has just been to Bangui to set up the work to put the operation on the ground and we adopted the decisions which will enable us to take that forward.

As I mentioned, we had dinner with candidate countries last evening where we talked about the neighbourhood with them as well.

Thank you."
