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NOTE

from :	General Secretariat of the Council
to :	Delegations
Subject:	Summary of the plenary session of the European Parliament, held in Strasbourg on 15 February 2012 Situation in Syria - Statement by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Minister Søvndal, on behalf of the High Representative, delivered the speech set out in the Annex.

For the political groups, the following speakers took the floor:

- Mr Salafranca (EPP, ES) stressed that several factors were having an impact on the situation combining (friction between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the dynamo effect of the Arab spring, China/Russia and other actors wishing to have more influence on the process). In his view, the fundamental issue to be addressed was how much longer such a situation could be tolerated. He supported the Arab League initiatives, and strengthened links with the resistance, and expressed his support for the idea of opening up humanitarian corridors. Mr Salafranca regretted that the activities of the Member States were insufficiently coordinated. He added that pressure had to be kept up on Russia and China, considering that recent opportunities had been missed.

- Ms De Keyser (S&D, BE) highlighted the a partial aspect of the fourth Parliament resolution on Syria that it addressed the Syrian people. She considered that a military solution would be the worse solution. Ms De Keyser also recalled that the Syrian opposition was asking for arms to be supplied. She stressed that initial hopes in Bashar Assad had been finally been shown to be unjustified and that steps should be taken to ensure that he was brought to justice (ICC). Ms De Keyser considered that the new constitution would not change anything and that the Council and the Commission should work on concrete measures.
- Mr Verhofstadt (ALDE, BE) criticised the fact that the EU had no strategy for Syria, where genocide was ongoing. He stressed that there was an urgent need for action and suggested establishing safe/no-fly zones. Mr Verhofstadt was also in favour of providing material and technological help to the Syrian opposition and to the Free Syrian Army. In his view, EU sanctions should be extended and further pressure should be put on China and Russia.
- Ms Flautre (Greens/EFA, FR) stressed that despite the intolerable terror exercised by the Syrian regime, the resistance by civilian society continued. In her view, Bashar Assad should be held responsible for his acts before the ICC. She said that the EU should step up its supplies to the civilian population and consider how to protect the Syrian people. Ms Flautre stressed that the EU must be very clear on its strategy, the priority being to provide support to the people and isolate the regime.
- Mr Tannock (ECR, UK) said that the regime had to be unambiguously condemned by the international community and called on the Syrian regime to withdraw its forces. He welcomed the Arab League initiatives and said that as long as Bashar Assad was in power fundamental democratic rights would not be respected. Mr Tannock believed that it was dangerous to arm the Syrian Free Army but his group could support safe haven for refugees with a no-fly zone, if this were militarily possible, near the Turkish border. He added that economic sanctions against Syria were needed.
- Mr Meyer (GUE/NGL, ES) stressed that his group was strongly opposed to any foreign military intervention in order to resolve the crisis. He explained that an armed response could not be the response. He agreed that the repression of Bashar Assad had to be stopped.
- Mr Belder (EFD, NL) stressed that there was a risk of civil war in Syria. It was unclear to him whether there was any alternative to the current regime and if the collapse of the Syrian state was desirable. He emphasised that there were also risks of terrorist groups taking advantage of the situation. Mr Belder said that the Syrian regime had to be forced to come to the negotiating table.

- Mr Obermayr (NI, AT) also stressed that terrorist groups could try to take advantage of the situation, which would be a catastrophe. In his view, the only solution was a serious dialogue with Bashar Assad.

The many interventions by individual Members largely mirrored the speakers from political groups. The Syrian regime was condemned by Members and numerous speakers considered that Bashar Assad should be held legally accountable. A number of Members stressed that the EU had no clear strategy for the country. Regarding the way to proceed/solutions, several options were put forward by Members. There was a very considerable support for providing humanitarian assistance and opening humanitarian corridors. Several Members also explicitly supported the Arab League and its initiatives. A number of Members said that the EU should support the Syrian opposition. Russia and China faced varying criticism and several Members called on the EU to put more pressure on them, in particular with a view to securing the adoption of an UN resolution on Syria. Continuing arms sales to the Syrian regime were also addressed by some speakers, whilst others called for additional/reinforced sanctions.

In response to the interventions, Minister Søvndal thanked Members for the lively debate. He again underlined the terrible situation in Syria and shared the contempt expressed for the Assad regime. Minister Søvndal recalled that Syria had been discussed on a number of occasions recently within the Foreign Affairs Council, and he outlined the EU's strategy. He identified some possible actions (peace-keeping force as suggested by the Arab League, international humanitarian corridors, etc.). Minister Søvndal also indicated that the sanctions against Syria would be tightened. Regarding the alternative to the current regime, he said that Syrian people wished to get on with their lives like everybody else.

Speech by Minister Søvndal; Strasbourg, 15 February 2012

Madam President, I am grateful for the opportunity to present the EU position and latest activities on Syria on behalf of the High Representative, Baroness Ashton.

The EU condemns the totally unacceptable escalation of violence in Syria. The time has come to speak with one voice and demand an end to the bloodshed and a democratic future for Syria. The EU has been leading international calls for strong UN action. We are very disappointed, as you all are, by the recent failure of the United Nations Security Council to adopt a resolution due to Russia and China's renewed veto. Last Saturday, following the vote, the High Representative once again stressed that the EU will continue to support all efforts by the League of Arab States and called once more on all members of the UN Security Council to assume their responsibilities.

The Syrian crisis is, and will remain, very high on the EU agenda. EU foreign ministers will discuss it again on 27 February. The EU has throughout the conflict stood by the Syrian people and the High Representative continues to increase pressure on the Syrian authorities through multiple levels. The urgent priority for now is to stop the regime's repression and the escalating violence.

In accordance with the Arab League's plan, it is also essential that the regime frees political detainees, removes troops, tanks and weapons from the cities and allows independent observers and the media to freely travel and report in Syria. To this end, the EU is intensively engaged with the League of Arab States and other players to find a peaceful solution. The High Representative has stressed the key role of regional involvement and Arab League leadership.

On the diplomatic front, Catherine Ashton has been speaking to Secretary-General El-Arabi to discuss next steps and express our political support for the efforts that the Arab League is undertaking to solve the Syrian crisis. She has also spoken to the Secretary-General of the UN Ban Ki-moon, Turkey's Foreign Minister Davutoğlu and several other leaders with the same objective.

The EU welcomes the League of Arab States' efforts to increase international pressure on the Syrian regime. Leadership of the Arab League is key. Due to the escalation of violence against the Syrian population, the League decided on 12 February to end its observation mission. It asked the UN Security Council to issue a resolution to form a joint Arab-UN peacekeeping force to supervise the implementation of a ceasefire.

The Arab League has also decided to enforce the economic sanctions of previous resolutions of the Arab League and agreed on a meeting of Friends of Syria to take place in Tunisia on 24 February. We welcome this development. The Tunis meeting will provide a timely opportunity to build an international consensus on Syria and put forward urgent proposals to stop the killings and to seek a peaceful outcome to the current crisis.

There is no doubt that the EU and the High Representative will take an active part in this endeavour. The High Representative has also offered EU expertise in the area of sanctions and has stressed the need to coordinate closely in the dialogue with opposition groups.

The work on the UN front must go on. We continue to seek the support of partners so that the Security Council can come back to this issue in due course and agree on a strong resolution on Syria. The High Representative is making the case rapidly with members of the Security Council and regional partners to achieve this goal. The EU message to Russia and China is clear: they should not be on the wrong side of history.

The international community has a responsibility to stop the regime's killing machine. Last Monday, during a debate at the United Nations General Assembly on the situation in Syria, a vast majority of UN Member States condemned the widespread violation of human rights by the regime. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in her assessment said that the Assad regime had 'manifestly failed' to fulfil its obligation to protect its population and had engaged in crimes against humanity.

The Human Rights Council at its upcoming session should also take appropriate action on Syria. The EU is ready to mobilise assistance to relieve the hardship of the Syrian population. The Commission is preparing a contingency plan in the area of humanitarian assistance. While bilateral cooperation with the Syrian regime is entirely suspended, the Commission and the External Action Service continue to support projects to the benefit of NGOs, Syrian civil society organisations and human rights defenders, as well as Palestinian refugees.

The situation in Syria requires that the EU must maintain a presence through its Member State missions and the EU delegation as the Syrian opposition is asking us to do. Not only to observe and report on the situation, but also to signal clearly that the regime cannot repress its population in total impunity and the Syrian people will not be left alone.

Close coordination among the EU missions in Damascus is taking place also with respect to contingency planning.

Similarly, actions are being undertaken with respect to the neighbouring countries. Last but not least, the EU continues to engage with Syrian opposition groups. It is essential to encourage them to strengthen their coordination and develop a common vision on the way forward in order to convince the Syrian population of the value of their cause and to promote an orderly and peaceful transition in Syria.

The High Representative has offered the EU's support to the Arab League in its efforts towards bringing together the Syrian opposition groups and their common vision for the transition. I would also like to thank you, honourable Members, for your support in the past months. The valued statements made in the European Parliament and the resolutions adopted by this House have helped the EU to shape its policy towards Syria.

It is important that we maintain pressure on the Syrian regime. The European Parliament has a key role in ensuring that the Syrian people are not left alone in their struggle. The High Representative is committed to continuing to work with you on joint efforts to support the Arab League and to stop the ongoing violence. Syria will be at the core of her meeting in Washington at the end of this week.

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