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**NOTE**

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from: General Secretariat of the Council  
to: Delegations

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Subject: European Parliament plenary session in Strasbourg on 15 March 2013: Syria, with specific reference to the humanitarian situation (debate)

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Ms Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, delivered the speech set out in [Annex I](#).

The following comments were made on behalf of the political groups:

- speaking on behalf of the EPP group, Mr Salafranca paid tribute to the EU staff member killed in Syria and thanked Ms Ashton for updating the EP on the present situation. He referred to the recent visit, sponsored by ALDE, the Commander-in-Chief of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who stated that, if given the necessary means, the opposition could resolve the crisis in one month. The international community was clearly blocked. He asked Ms Ashton to comment on the terms of a possible future political agreement, the responsibility to protect obligations, and what was meant by 'non-lethal equipment and technical assistance'. He said the current situation was embarrassing and asked why the partial lifting of embargo had not been discussed in the Council. He concluded that in such a dramatic situation the main mistake which could be made would be to fear making a mistake;
- speaking on behalf of the S&D group, Ms de Keyser stressed that the humanitarian situation was dramatic and destabilising for countries in the region, and praised Turkey in particular for agreeing to host Syrian refugees. She said that, according to reports, UNICEF will run out of funds by the end of March if the international community fails to deliver the necessary funding. She stressed it was vital to provide the necessary funding for humanitarian activities. She agreed with Ms Ashton that the solution could only be a political one, and she was sceptical that supplying arms to the opposition would really contribute to a reduction in the number of casualties. She warned those who wanted to help the revolutionaries to be careful before choosing the side they would support;
- speaking on behalf of the ALDE group, Mr Verhofstadt was critical of the fact that, after two years of searching for a political solution, the outcome was 70 000 dead in Syria and 70 000 new refugees every day. He said that not enough had been done to bring humanitarian relief to those in need since aid money, delivered through the UN and the Red Cross, was going to the areas held by the regime and only to people loyal to Assad. Referring to General Idris' plea for supplies of weapons, he emphasised that on the ground the embargo was currently working against the victims of Assad, not in favour of them. He welcomed the signs of a change in attitude in a number of countries, notably the UK and the USA. He called on Ms Ashton to bring about a dramatic change at least in terms of the delivery of humanitarian aid, which should go directly to the liberated areas in northern Syria, controlled by the FSA;

- speaking on behalf of the Greens/EFA, Ms Flaûtre said that Ms Ashton was clearly naïve if she was hoping that all sides in Syria would respect humanitarian law. The neutrality of aid delivery had been jeopardised by selective delivery on the ground. She asked Ms Ashton to do better in future. She suggested a change of approach and thought that the emergence of post-Assad Syria in the liberated areas in the north of the country, where the coalition was trying to re-establish basic services, ought to be supported and monitored more closely. She said that in reality the FSA was composed of 300 000 persons, of whom 100 000 had been armed, and included 5 000 Islamists, of whom 500 were foreigners;
- speaking on behalf of the ECR, Mr Tannock stressed that the situation in Syria appeared to be becoming increasingly desperate, with both sides determined that they could win the war, clearly disregarding the human cost. A full-blown refugee crisis had the potential to destabilise the region, and in particular Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. He stressed that women and children have been suffering the most. He concluded that every effort must be made to galvanise the international community and end this catastrophic situation;
- speaking on behalf of the GUE/NGL, Mr Meyer said his group supported a rigorous and independent investigation into all crimes committed against civilians, whether by government or opposition forces. He stressed that a military intervention, like those which had taken place in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, was not an option. Instead, the people of Syria should negotiate their own political future. He said that military training provided to the opposition by the US was not good news and that more should be done to bring the parties together for peaceful talks and fully support the efforts of the UN Special Envoy;
- speaking on behalf of the EFD, Mr Belder said that a regional catastrophe was imminent in Syria and the neighbouring countries. He asked about UK and French support for the Syrian opposition, and wondered what the implications were for future policy towards Syria. He spoke about the need to protect Christians and end the violent conflict ;

- speaking on behalf of the NI, Mr Brons said that while the Syrian government's handling of the protest had been grossly disproportionate right from the outset, its brutality had sometimes been matched by the opposition and neither of the two sides could be called democratic in his view. He said the West had been advancing its own political agenda in Syria, consisting of depriving Iran of an ally and Israel of an adversary. He concluded that the priority must be to end the bloodshed.

Ms Ashton had to leave the chamber in order to go to Pristina and was given again the floor following the speakers for the political groups.

In her concluding remarks, Ms Ashton stressed that discussions about whether or not to engage in the supply of weapons had been taking place worldwide, but the main issue being debated today was the supply of humanitarian aid. She accepted that this had been difficult but stressed that it was very important to work as effectively as possible with the agencies and the NGOs and keep humanitarian workers safe. She explained that efforts were being made to improve aid distribution in order to reach areas that were not covered.

She also stressed that the EU was supporting those countries in the region which were having to deal with the influx of refugees.

The floor was then given to Ms Oomen-Ruijten, who asked Ms Ashton to comment on whether the FAC had discussed the supply of arms to the Syrian opposition, whether the Syrian question had been discussed with Russia, the possible creation of safe havens for internally displaced persons, and the supply of non-lethal weapons.

Ms Ashton replied that, during the discussions on Russia, which had served as a basis for the European Council discussions on Russia, a wide range of methods of engagement had been discussed, and confirmed that Syria was always on the agenda in discussions with Russian counterparts. With regard to weapons and non-lethal aid, she explained that this had been placed on the agenda of the FAC on two occasions, that the discussions on the various options were continuing and that no Member State had suggested lifting the arms embargo.

In the subsequent discussion, individual members echoed the positions expressed on behalf of the political groups. In addition they raised the following issues: the situation of Palestinian refugees in Syria, the possible referral of Assad to the International Criminal Court, support for Commissioner Georgieva, the possible intervention of the Arab League, support for refugees in Lebanon and the need to accept more refugees and asylum-seekers in the EU.

Mr Fule concluded the debate by adding a few comments in addition to what Ms Ashton had already said. He stressed that, without the EU's involvement, the humanitarian crisis would be unmanageable; the prospects for a political solution were very bleak and the situation was developing into a regional crisis. With regard to assistance inside Syria, he explained that the Commission was trying to be innovative in the delivery of such assistance, and was now working more closely with the Syrian coalition, the Syrian Liberation Army and the local authorities, trying to map out the needs and the possibilities on the ground. Support was also being given to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, which host refugees within their territories, including Palestinian refugees from Syria, stressing that the EU was the main contributor to humanitarian aid.

Check against delivery

**Speech by Ms Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy**

Mr President, thank you for your understanding. I go to Pristina this evening.

Can I begin by saying I learned with great sadness of the tragic death yesterday of Ahmad Shihadeh, a policy officer of the EU delegation in Syria. He was killed during a rocket attack on the Damascus suburb of Deraa, where he lived. Ahmad died while providing humanitarian help to the community. Our thoughts are with his family and friends and his colleagues in the delegation.

We know that the situation in Syria is appalling, that Bashar al-Assad should leave power, that the fighting should stop and that the country – according to some reports 70% destroyed – needs to be rebuilt.

This situation reflects in part the inability of the international community to find a coherent, united way to respond to the horror that is being perpetrated and to act collectively to protect the people. Without a Security Council mandate or a clear situation on the ground, military action by the international community is not under consideration.

I want to be clear too that on the occasions this year when I have put the arms embargo on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council – with all options to be discussed – no Member State has proposed that it be lifted to arm the opposition. All Member States have wanted to make sure that support is available for the people, and for the opposition, in the form of non-lethal equipment and technical assistance. This I reflected in my meeting with General Idris a few days ago, when I invited him to let me know urgently what assistance we could supply.

So we work in the situation we find ourselves in, with all its constraints. This is a messy and complicated situation on the ground. Not everyone involved in the fighting shares our values or our vision for the future of Syria. As Lakhdar Brahimi said when he came at my invitation to the Foreign Affairs Council this week, there is no easy solution; if there were, we would have found it by now. We have to work for a political solution that will lead to a lasting peace.

We should support all those who are actively trying to find that solution: Mr Brahimi and Sheikh Moaz al-Khatib in particular. And we should continue to talk with Russia and China especially, but also with all the members of the Security Council, as well as others across the region and indeed the world, in order to try to find a way through.

Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva, who has done a fantastic job as the Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid, has been very clear: from a humanitarian perspective, too, there are no military fixes. Humanitarian corridors, buffer zones and other ideas of the same kind are not viable solutions. As Commissioner Georgieva put it so clearly in a meeting with Members of the European Parliament – with a map of the conflict in her hands – where are we going to place a corridor or a buffer zone? How would we protect it and the humanitarian workers, in the absence of a Security Council resolution?

Our priority must be to help innocent civilians. As Commissioner Georgieva has explained to all of us, our chances of success greatly depend on our ability to maintain the neutrality of our humanitarian aid.

However, I issue a strong appeal to the Syrian authorities to allow more international humanitarian relief workers into the country to ensure that aid reaches all affected areas, and I reiterate my plea for all sides to respect international humanitarian law.

The brutal violence used by Bashar al-Assad and his regime – leaving 70 000 dead, a million fleeing from Syria and three million people displaced internally – cannot be justified under any circumstances.

We are constantly trying to adapt to the situation on the ground. Every single financial instrument available to the EU and its Member States has been engaged in our joint efforts to assist Syrians inside and outside the country, to provide assistance to refugees and their host countries, to support human rights activists in raising their cases, to support students to continue their studies and to help people simply to survive.

However, we have to be more effective and innovative, and we have expanded our help to the Syrian Opposition Coalition and its Assistance Coordination Unit as well as the Free Syrian Army. Syrians – wherever they are – must not feel abandoned by the international community. We are looking into the best way of channelling our assistance across the lines of fire and taking measures on the ground to reach those who need support, although we must also make sure our support reaches the right people and does not fall into the hands of extremists.

So far, we have provided EUR 100 million of non-humanitarian support. It is not yet enough, but we are determined to do as much as we possibly can. We are also leading the international donor coordination efforts and are preparing the ground for joint assessment activities for the important work to come once this conflict is over.

Both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, we are the biggest donor in this crisis. I have already paid tribute, and I do so again, to the work of Kristalina Georgieva. Following the Kuwait conference on 30 January, the total of our humanitarian assistance will reach EUR 600 million. EUR 436 million is already committed: EUR 200 million from the EU budget, the rest from Member States.

I want to thank this House for helping in mobilising the funds from the Emergence Aid Reserve. The last tranche became available in December, but I have to tell honourable Members that we know that more is going to be needed.

That assistance provides shelter, support, emergency health care, water and sanitation, implemented by the Red Cross, by UN organisations and by the High Commissioner for Refugees, as well as NGOs. We are also mobilising in-kind assistance from EU Member States for refugees, using the EU civil protection mechanism – in April of this year for Turkey and in September for Jordan.



It is not easy. We want to reach more people in need. Together with our partners, we try to deliver assistance to all areas of Syria, including those that are fiercely disputed. Yet access is challenging – often impossible – and far too many innocent civilians are beyond the reach of our humanitarian agencies and workers. We have to find all the possible channels for delivering this assistance.

We know too that the constant stream of refugees puts an unsustainable burden on the socio-economic and, in some cases, political stability of the neighbours of Syria. One illustration: eight per cent of Lebanon's inhabitants are refugees, and in Jordan the figure is six per cent. The situation is becoming critical. Like you, I have been to visit the camps and have seen the terrible situation there.

We cannot rule out that the conflict will drag on. We have to be prepared for a direct impact on the European Union too. Similarly, we have to prepare our 'day after' planning, and that means continuing to ensure that we are able to bring about, even now, a minimum of normalcy, with a governing authority ensuring order wherever possible, and with basic services being supplied.

Success, of course, depends on the willingness of all members of the international community to rally behind a political solution. We have to keep up the momentum, we have to avoid initiatives starting to disappear, and we have to support efforts to explore willingness on both sides to engage in the first steps of any approach.

We know from our recent contacts with Mr Brahimi, when he came to the Foreign Affairs Council, and from meetings with Sheikh al-Khatib that they are serious but they are cautious. Yet we agree that a political solution is necessary. In this spirit, we will continue to act with the clear intention of showing Assad that the EU is mobilising all efforts to oppose what is happening.

What is most important is to keep the momentum of al-Khatib's initiative by creating space for dialogue, to work closely with Russia, with Arab partners, with our contacts in Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – in short, to explore all options of engagement that can lead to some form of political dialogue further down the road. As Lakhdar Brahimi said to me and our Ministers a few days ago, the 'Assad must go' slogan is not a substitute for a political process, and a process is what we need if we are going to get out of this current impasse.