Debriefing on the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) of 31 January 2013

SPEAKING NOTE
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I am pleased to report to the Foreign Affairs Committee on the outcome of the Foreign Affairs Council held in Brussels on 31st January.

The Council focused on the Southern Neighbourhood, Mali, priorities for the EU in US foreign policy, Somalia and the Arctic. The President of Somalia was invited to exchange views with the Council over lunch.

Ahead of the discussion on the Arab Spring at tomorrow's European Council, FAC took stock of the EU’s response to the transition in several countries across the region. Honourable Members will recall that the EU's response has been far-reaching in terms of political and financial engagement. €660 million in new grants to the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood (in addition to the €3.5 billion already programmed for 2011-2013). High Representative Ashton is piloting the Task Force concept with events held to date in Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt that mobilise additional assistance and foster people-to-people
links. On the trade front, mandates for negotiations on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan were adopted in December 2011: discussions with Morocco are progressing most speedily, with negotiations expected to begin early this year. Ministers recalled the importance of the EU ensuring that human rights and democratic principles are an integral part of our engagement in the region.

The discussion on Syria took place at a timely moment following the briefing on 29 January of the UN Security Council by Joint Special Representative Brahimi and the meeting in Paris on 28 January in support of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC).

The worsening humanitarian situation was a cause of very serious concern, as internally displaced people and refugee camps are increasingly difficult to reach with humanitarian assistance. Ministers considered further ways in which to intensify support. Commissioner Georgieva briefed Ministers on the humanitarian situation. She termed the Kuwait meeting on 30th January a success, in respect both of pledges made (exceeding the target of $1.5 billion) and engagement by Arab countries. Europe had also made a strong showing, promising $460 million in additional funds.
JSR Brahimi is set to attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 18\textsuperscript{th} February. That Council will also be the occasion for discussion on sanctions, which will expire at the end of February.

On \textbf{Egypt}, the Council considered the economic and political challenges being faced by the country. The need for the EU to continue to encourage the government and opposition to engage in dialogue was underscored. Ministers noted the importance of working patiently for sustainable change with the Morsi government, whilst also ensuring that every effort is made to respect human rights and democratic principles. The Council highlighted Egypt's role as a lynchpin in regional stability and the EU's offer to deploy an Election Observation Mission for the upcoming elections was noted. The Council adopted the Crisis Management Concept for a CSDP border security mission to \textbf{Libya}, a development warmly welcomed by several Ministers.

FAC also considered progress in tackling the crisis in \textbf{Mali} as an update to the Extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council of 17\textsuperscript{th} January. France briefed the Council on military advances. There was wide support for the French-Malian military initiative, accompanied by a clear understanding that African ownership should be ensured. The EU Training Mission to Mali was welcomed, with many member states using the opportunity to pledge contributions. The Council also
considered other progress, particularly the adoption of a roadmap for transition by the Malian government, which opens the way for re-establishing constitutional order and greater stability for the people of Mali. The adoption of the roadmap is a vital step for the resumption of EU development assistance. On February 5th the Support and Follow up Group will gather in Brussels to discuss the ways to support the implementation of this roadmap. Commissioner Georgieva confirmed the concerns of many over the humanitarian situation in Mali, notably in the North, along with the enormous challenge of delivering humanitarian assistance over closed borders and the risk of inter-ethnic tensions. The pressure on neighbouring countries is also growing, as they face waves of refugees and economic disturbance.

The Council adopted Conclusions which reflected these elements, alongside a message of support for Malian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Ministers voiced particular concern over the human rights violations triggered by the events in the central and northern parts of Mali and declared a readiness to provide all relevant support to prevent the spread of abuse. Another key element, stressed by the Conclusions, is the need for co-ordination of international engagement in Mali.

As the second Obama administration takes office, the Council considered likely foreign policy priorities for the EU in its contacts
with the USA and ways to deepen Transatlantic co-operation. The appointment of John Kerry as Secretary of State was warmly welcomed. Ministers highlighted the Middle East Peace Process as a key priority for EU-US collaboration. Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood, engagement in Asia - including Burma-Myanmar - climate change and energy were amongst the areas of mutual interest identified. Ministers emphasised the importance of work towards a Free Trade Agreement with the US, which carries the potential to deliver substantial commercial and economic benefits to both sides.

The High Representative and Ministers met the President of Somalia over lunch and took stock of the situation in the country and its impact on the wider region. This is the first visit of President Sheikh Mohammed to Europe. It was an opportunity to assure him that the EU will continue to build on its twenty years' involvement with Somalia. The Council also adopted Conclusions, welcoming the adoption of a Constitution in Somalia, stressing the primary responsibility of Somali authorities for the economic recovery of the country and successful prevention of organised crime and threats of violence in the future.

The Council also discussed the Arctic, underlining the strategic, economic and environmental importance of the region, but also its vulnerability, the need for a sustainable approach to its natural
resources and the responsibility to respect the needs of the indigenous peoples. The Joint Communication by the HR and the Commission of June 2012 setting out the developing EU Arctic policy was generally welcomed. The Council also discussed EU’s bid for observer status in the Arctic Council, and hoped that a positive decision would be taken by Arctic Council Ministers in May. Whatever the Arctic Council’s decision, the Council underlined that the EU’s engagement in the Arctic should continue and be enhanced.

The Council was debriefed on a joint mission to the Southern Caucasus by the foreign ministers of Sweden, Poland and Bulgaria. The December visit to the region reconfirmed the potential for a stronger political role by the EU in that region. Support for the work of the Minsk group on Nagorno-Karabakh and for utilizing the leverage offered by Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations were mentioned as important considerations.

Let me highlight as well the some of the other Council Conclusions FAC adopted:

- Conclusions on a Crisis Management Concept for a Civilian EU Mission to Libya – aiming to provide advice, mentoring and training in the strategic area of border security, which is
significant for the security in wider region, especially in neighbouring Mali.

- Conclusions on **Maghreb** – sending a message of support and encouragement for the regional integration of Maghreb countries and adopting a Joint Communication on the matter.

- Conclusions on **Transitional societies** – the Council welcomed the Joint Communication on how the EU can provide better, faster and more efficient support for transition processes in its neighbourhood and beyond. The document builds on a wide range of instruments already available, as well as on the experience of those EU Member States that have been through similar processes themselves.

Thank you for your attention. I am now ready to take your questions.