Opening remarks/ Introductory speech

Mr. President, Honourable Members,

It is my pleasure to address you today on behalf of the High Representative and to outline the EU's work programme for the upcoming 22nd session of the UN Human Rights Council.

Fully committed to a strong and effective multilateral human rights system, the EU is becoming ever more active in bringing its human rights priorities to this important multilateral forum, and thereby asserting that the United Nations matters.

The awarding of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the EU recognised our sustained effort to promote and protect human rights world-wide. We take this as an encouragement to work even harder for this cause. The adoption of the EU Human Rights Strategy and Action Plan and the appointment of Stavros Lambrinidis as EU Special Representative for Human Rights will help us to deliver on this task.

Mr. President,
Throughout the last year, the Human Rights Council in Geneva has again demonstrated its willingness to respond to the calls of millions of citizens’ for their rights. We have warmly supported the fact that more and more partners and other regional Groups bring specific country situations to the Human Rights Council.

Mr President, honourable Members,

Turning to the 22nd session, let me first underline that the acute crisis in Syria must stay high on the agenda of the Human Rights Council. The recent report of the Commission of Inquiry presents an alarming account of the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict in that country. Strongly committed to the fight against impunity, the EU will insist on the need for accountability for the serious human rights violations, including crimes under international law, perpetrated in Syria. Moreover, the mandate of the Commission should be renewed further, and we will push for a one-year extension as to give it a solid basis for its work.

The EU will also continue to draw the attention of the international community to the persistent critical human rights situation in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea which requires greater scrutiny. Together with Japan, the EU will present a resolution proposing the creation of an independent investigative mechanism or Commission of Inquiry [further discussions required to develop a full common EU position and work out detailed modalities of such a mechanism, name, scope and mandate] in support of the Special
Rapporteur whose mandate should be renewed. The EU will also reinforce its calls on the government of the DPRK urgently to improve the human rights situation in the country.

Remaining seriously concerned by the worrying human rights situation in Iran, the EU will actively work for the extension of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur and press to increase the backing for this mandate through outreach and demarches, building on the recent work in the context of the UN General Assembly resolution on Iran.

The EU believes that the issues of accountability and reconciliation in Sri Lanka should stay on the agenda of the HRC and is moreover concerned about recent attacks on the independence of the judiciary in that country.

Looking ahead, just like last year, a key EU priority for the June session of the Council will be the situation of human rights in Belarus which continues to give rise to grave concern.

The reports of human rights abuses in Mali are of increasing concern and should be discussed, based on the report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights focussing on the North of the country. The EU also appeals to the authorities to immediately investigate the reported human rights abuses and to hold those responsible for human rights violations to account. The EU calls for a rapid mobilisation and deployment of human rights observers.
Moreover, in this or subsequent sessions, the EU will support the call for the Council to address the state of human rights in the Bahrain, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, South Sudan and Sudan. We will also closely follow the evolution of the human rights situation in North Africa, Russia and in some of the Central Asian countries.

Mr President, honourable Members,

It is heartening that one country regularly on the agenda of the Council is a source of good news in recent years. This is due in no small part to the tireless international attention and our collective support to the many democracy and human rights activists in the country including Nobel Peace and Sakharov Price laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The EU welcomes the cooperation with Myanmar/Burma which led to the consensual adoption of a General Assembly resolution in December 2012, reflecting the important recent progress in the country while also recognizing remaining human rights concerns, for instance the remaining political prisoners as well as the situation of the Rohingya in Rakhine State and in the ethnic areas. The resolution which will be presented at the 22nd session of the Human Right Council will encourage further reforms.

Mr. President,

I am now turning to the thematic priorities of the EU. Given our conviction that freedom of religion or belief is an inalienable human right and an essential pillar of safe and prosperous societies, the EU
will again present a resolution on Freedom of Religion or Belief. This year we will also aim at the consensual extension of a strong, independent mandate of the Special Rapporteur. HR/VP Ashton is concerned by the increasing number of acts of discrimination based on religion or belief across the world and condemned at several occasions the violence against persons belonging to religious minorities everywhere in the world.

Gender equality and Women empowerment is also a core priority for the High Representative, and we are very supportive of the holding of a high-level event celebrating the Power of Empowered Women on 26 February.

As in previous years, together with Latin American and Caribbean countries, the EU will devote particular attention to the rights of the child, this year focusing on the right to the enjoyment by children of the highest attainable standard of health.

Throughout the year, the EU will also work with a cross regional group of like-minded partners to continue to keep the issue of discrimination and violence against individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity on the agenda of the United Nations, in follow-up to the landmark resolution of the Human Rights Council session of June 2011 and the successful cross-regional activities in New York.

Mr President, honourable Members,
The EU will advocate for freedom of association and assembly and pay special attention to the promotion and protection of freedom of expression, notably through the Internet.

We all recognize that the work of human rights defenders and civil society organizations is essential for democratic societies, and restrictions placed on NGO activities are a growing concern in many countries. The EU regularly defends the role of civil society representatives and human rights activists in the UN context. We are strongly concerned by reports of threats and reprisals affecting those who cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms, including the Human Rights Council and its Special Procedures, and we strongly condemn and speak out against such incidents.

As the full realization of human rights is important for achieving sustainable development, the EU is pleased that the so-called mainstreaming Panel of the Human Rights Council will this year discuss the integration of human rights into the post-2015 global development agenda which the EU will advocate in line with the corresponding commitment in the Human Rights Action Plan.

Mr. President, honourable Members,

The March session of the Human Rights Council is also a world-wide gathering of human rights activists. The Human Rights Council is a crucial body for the promotion of universal human rights standards and the UN's main forum affording world-wide scrutiny of the human rights performance of all countries. With this in mind, the EU reaffirms its
attachment to the Universal Periodic Review and calls upon all UN member States to effectively cooperate with this universal mechanism. The EU makes every effort to preserve the universality also of the UPR and continues appealing to Israel to resume cooperation, also with the Human Rights Council more broadly and the Office of the High Commissioner.

In closing, Mr President, honourable Members, let me emphasize that the unwavering support of this House is very important for the success of our efforts. We look forward to the participation of a European Parliament delegation in the high-level opening week of the Council. We count on your encouragement and continued vigilance to push us further to make good on our commitments. We know that you will use contacts with your counterparts in support of our initiatives and advocate for new issues that should be taken up by the international community.

Thank you very much.