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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council

"The crisis in Ukraine was once again on the top of our agenda.

We were delighted to welcome OSCE Chairman-in-Office, President Burkhalter, who debriefed us on his visit to Moscow last week, and the work he's been undertaking. He took us through the OSCE's engagement in Ukraine, through the Special Monitoring Mission and the Election Observation Mission for the upcoming Presidential Elections, as well as the roadmap that he's proposing in support of the implementation of the Geneva Joint Statement of 17 April. We support these efforts.

Ministers also discussed the most recent developments on the ground. Inevitably there was a great deal of concern over the continued efforts of pro-Russian separatists to destabilise Eastern and Southern Ukraine. These actions are unacceptable and they must stop.

We were very clear as well in our position regarding the so-called "referenda": The EU will not recognise any illegitimate and illegal "referenda".

We believe it's very important that all parties concentrate on implementing the Geneva Statement, of which dialogue and the end of violence and provocation are essential elements. We welcome the efforts by the Ukrainian authorities to implement the Geneva

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Agreement and we call on the Russian Federation to take effective steps to fulfil their commitments made in Geneva.

The EU gives its strong support for the holding of free and fair Presidential elections on 25 May. This is an opportunity for the people of Ukraine to decide on their own future. Voters and candidates alike should all have safe and secure conditions across the country.

We're encouraging the efforts of the Government of Ukraine to reach out to all regions within the framework of the National Dialogue, including on the constitutional reform process. It is vital to ensure the rights of national minorities.

We remain determined to continue with our efforts for the stabilisation of the situation in Ukraine, including through a strong economic and financial assistance package. The European Commission will tomorrow in Brussels meet the Ukrainian government led by Prime Minister Yatsenyuk to discuss the challenges ahead.

The EU is also ready to assist Ukraine in the field of civilian security sector reform. Ministers today asked the European External Action Service to work on elements for a possible civilian CSDP mission in this area.

Finally, because of the situation in Crimea and the deterioration of the situation in other parts of Ukraine, we expanded the sanctions criteria and decided to add 13 individuals to the list of those subject to an asset ban and travel ban. That brings the total to 61. Two confiscated entities in Crimea and Sevastopol will be subject to an asset freeze.

We also decided to pay particular attention to attitudes towards the holding of free and fair Presidential elections when we decide about possible future measures.

And we underlined our strong condemnation of the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by the Russian Federation.

Based on the recent evaluation of the legal consequences of this annexation we expect the Commission and the Council to swiftly agree concrete measures as part of the EU's overall response.

We also took the opportunity today to discuss the latest developments in the Middle East Peace Process.

We continue to fully support the efforts of US Secretary of State John Kerry to try to reach peace in the region. Recent developments which put into question the continue negotiations are deeply worrying. As I said many times before, we believe that negotiations are the best and the only way forward. And these extensive efforts over the last months should not go to waste.

So we hope and urge both parties to use the coming weeks to find the common ground and political strength to resume the process and to make the necessary bold decisions. We also call on all sides to exercise maximum restraint and avoid any action which could further undermine peace efforts and the viability of a two-state solution.

The European Union has consistently supported intra-Palestinian reconciliation behind President Abbas, in line with the principles set out in his speech of the 4 May 2011. Any new government must uphold the principle of non-violence, remain committed to achieving a two-state solution and a negotiated peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We will continue to work tirelessly to help achieve such an agreement and we are ready to support this goal through an unprecedented support package in the event of an agreement.

Finally, I just want to focus on the situation in Nigeria, where ministers expressed their deep concern about the recent terrorist attacks in northern Nigeria and the suffering of the people of that country.

We strongly condemn the indiscriminate killing of hundreds of civilians and the abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls in Borno State. We call for their immediate and unconditional release of the school girls and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

The EU and its Member States offer continued support to Nigeria in solving this crime and in its efforts to defeat terrorism in all its forms.

We will continue to work towards ending the culture of impunity for the use of sexual violence, and we fully support the intention of the UN Security Council to consider appropriate measures against Boko Haram."
