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R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council

"Thank you everyone.

We started our meeting today with the discussion on the latest developments in Ukraine. I invited Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin to come and to talk to us about President Poroshenko's peace plan as well as the plans to stabilise the country.

All the Ministers supported the plan as a major opportunity for de-escalation of the situation and called on all sides to honour a ceasefire and create the conditions needed for the implementation of this plan. We called in particular on Russia to support the plan and use its influence to ensure its implementation.

We want to see the spiral of violence ending and we called on all sides to do their maximum to protect civilians and to let humanitarian organisations do their job.

We also adopted several concrete decisions. First of all, we started to implement our policy of non-recognition of the illegal annexation of Crimea and decided to prohibit the import of goods from Crimea to the European Union, if they don't have Ukrainian certificates.

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Secondly, we agreed to establish a CSDP mission to assist Ukraine in the field of civilian security sector reform, including police and rule of law. Steps will now be taken in order to enable early deployment of the mission during the summer.

Finally, we completed the preparatory work necessary for the full signature of the Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Ukraine which will as you know take place on 27 June in Brussels, together with the signing of agreements with Moldova and Georgia. We are very much looking forward to this.

We also confirmed today that the EU is ready to hold not just expert, but also political level consultations with Ukraine and Russia on the implementation aspects of the agreement.

And of course, ministers reminded everyone that any threats by Russia of trade measures against countries which sign these agreements are unjustified.

In looking at our Southern Neighbourhood, Ministers around the table were extremely concerned about the sentences pronounced this morning against the Al Jazeera journalists, and those pronounced in absentia against a number of European journalists.

We've also expressed great concern about the death sentences against more than 180 people in Minya and the recent decision by the court in Giza to start the process of imposing death sentences against 14 leading figures from Islamist movements.

We were pleased to welcome today Nikolay Mladenov, who is as you know the UN special envoy to Iraq, to look at how the international community can coordinate its efforts to ease the crisis in Iraq.

There is great concern on the rapidly deteriorating situation, including the latest reports this morning that ISIS having taken control of a number of border posts to Syria and Jordan.

As well as a serious security crisis, this is a major humanitarian disaster. We are doing all we can to help, and we already made available 12 million euros in humanitarian assistance.

EU ministers remain firmly committed to Iraq's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is essential for the stability of the whole region. And together with our international partners, we will continue to support the Iraqi authorities in their fight against terrorism.

I will be meeting the Secretary Kerry tomorrow, to talk with him about his visit to the region. We hope that following the recent elections, a government can be formed which fully represents the will of the Iraqi people and can meet the challenges that the country faces.

We recognised that Libya is at a critical stage in its transition to democracy. And this can only be a success if it is based on a constructive political process, the rule of law and respect for people's rights.

We are very concerned by the deterioration of the political and security situation.

We think that the elections on Wednesday are an important moment. We hope they will be peaceful and inclusive and lead to the formation of a government that can command wide political support. My envoy Bernardino Leon is working very hard with partners on the ground. It is vital that the international community coordinates closely, led by the United Nations.

And we remain deeply concerned about the recent tragedies at sea involving migrants heading for Europe.

We will continue our efforts to assist the Libyan authorities in the field of border control and security, especially through our mission.

And finally we welcomed the announcement today by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that the remaining 8% of the Syrian chemicals are being removed from the country and loaded on board the Danish vessel Ark Futura. International pressure and the concerted efforts by OPCW and the joint OPCW-UN mission have yielded results.

Thank you."
