



Milan, 30 August 2014
140830/01

R E M A R K S

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the end of the Informal meeting of European Union Foreign Ministers (Gymnich)

“Can I say first of all a big thank you to you and your team, Minister, and to the people of Milan who’ve been extremely kind and generous in giving us wonderful facilities to have this Gymnich meeting.

As you said, the Gymnich is important because it’s an opportunity for Ministers to think about the longer term in the most strategic way. We have focused our attention on three key issues during the course of the last day and a half.

Not surprisingly, yesterday a great deal of our time was devoted to the crisis in Ukraine and all Ministers expressed their deep concerns about the recent aggression against Ukraine by regular Russian military forces.

This goes against the efforts we have been making towards finding a political solution to this crisis, most recently in the discussions that we had in Minsk which you know I participated in together with my colleagues from the European Commission, Karel De Gucht, Commissioner for Trade, and Günther Öttinger, the Commissioner for Energy.

We are very clear - there is no military solution to this crisis.

We need a sustainable political solution in full respect of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. I believe it is more necessary than ever. So we continue to urge Russia to stop all hostilities, to stop the flow of arms, equipment and personnel into the conflict region, and to withdraw its forces from Ukraine.

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I will be reporting on our discussions to the European Council this evening, and I will meet President Poroshenko who is currently in Brussels. And European leaders will then decide how to react to the latest events.

But we also spent a lot of time talking about events in our Southern Neighbourhood. Ministers condemned the unacceptable actions of ISIL and we agreed that we need to redouble our efforts to combat the threat they pose, in close collaboration with the countries in the region.

The threat is not only for the region itself, but the spillover also affects Europe directly, not least because of the danger posed by foreign fighters.

That means we need to work within the European Union – including with our colleagues the Interior Ministers – to combat radicalisation.

It is also vital that we provide political and humanitarian support to the government in Iraq and to the Kurdish authorities.

The EU will continue to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq, to work to ease the suffering of all those caught up in the fighting in Iraq and Syria, and to assist the neighbouring countries, especially Jordan, which are doing so much to help refugees.

And then this morning we had a long discussion about the Middle East and we welcomed the ceasefire agreement in Gaza that brings an end to the recent violence.

We all know how important it is to address the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

We thank Egypt for its mediation efforts and urge the Israelis and Palestinians to seize this opportunity to negotiate a comprehensive and sustainable agreement. An agreement that should also address all the root causes of the conflict and change the situation in Gaza.

A durable peace can only be achieved through the resumption of the Middle East peace process, leading to a two state solution. and we stand ready to contribute to support a lasting solution.

Thank you.”