

Brussels, 28 may 2011

Dear Minister, dear colleague,

In view of the dramatic events which are taking place in Syria and in the Middle East, and following my visit to the region, I have decided to convene an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, next Wednesday 1 June, at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.

Please find herewith attached the agenda and a background note prepared by the EEAS.

I look forward to meeting you in Florence next Wednesday.

Baroness Catherine Ashton of Upholland
EU High Representative/Vice President of the Commission

Encl.: 2

**Draft agenda
Foreign Affairs Council
Wednesday 1 June 2011
Palazzo Vecchio
Florence**

Cons/2011-123

1. Adoption of the draft agenda
2. Report by the High representative on her recent visit to the region (Egypt / Arab League, Jordan, Israel, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon)
3. Report by UK, F, DE and PT on the last meeting of the United Nations Security Council
4. Report by the rotating Presidency of the Home Affairs Council on the Union's response to the massive exodus of civilians from Syria
5. Presentation by the Commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood policy, Stefan Füle, on available options under the ENPI
6. Presentation by the chair of the Political and Security Committee, Olof Skoog, on a possible EU CSDP operation in response to the crisis

Coffee break 11.00-11.30

7. Formal round of interventions by national delegations

Buffet lunch and bilateral consultations 13.30-14.30

8. Continuation of the discussion
9. Summing up by the HRVP and first round of discussion on the draft conclusions

Coffee break and bilateral consultations 16.30-17.00

10. Adoption of the conclusions

Background note

The crisis in Syria

For weeks, Syrian authorities have brutally repressed demonstrations by opposition forces demanding the lifting of the state of emergency and the granting of greater civil and political rights, including the liberation of political prisoners and the establishment of a truly multiparty political system. This was accompanied by increasing discontent within the establishment and the emergence of a rift in the Ba'ath party, threatening the leadership of President Assad.

Yesterday's demonstrations were particularly virulent and ended up in a bloodshed, with over 200 people killed and thousands wounded by the Syrian security forces. This was met with massive resignations within the Ba'ath party, in the establishment (several Syrian ambassadors across the world have resigned) and in the army.

The brutal repression was unanimously condemned by the EU, the US and like-minded countries.

Discussions, led by the UK, F, PT, DE and US, are ongoing at the UNSC with a view to adopting a resolution condemning the violence. Lebanon, the only Arab country currently in the UNSC, seems reluctant to support such a move, which could threaten the fragile equilibrium between its different religious communities. Other UNSC members, including at least one of the P5, are likely to share this approach.

The Arab League voiced its concern about developments in Syria and called on both sides to exercise restraint.

The leaders of the Christian communities in Syria voiced concern about the preservation of the multi religious and secular state in Syria.

President Ahmadinejad praised, during a speech delivered at the Iranian Majlis, the courage of political opponents, called for the departure of President Assad and hailed the establishment of a truly Islamist republic.

The leader of Hamas in exile in Damascus, Khaled Meshal, welcomed such a statement and urged the Palestinian population in the Gaza strip to show solidarity towards their Syrian brethren. Meshal added that intra-palestinian negotiations should be put on hold since this was not the time to engage in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

In reaction to the above statements, the government of Israel deployed additional troops along its borders with Syria, on the Golan heights, and around the Gaza Strip.

In the meantime thousands of civilians are fleeing the country, via Lebanon, trying to reach the shores of Cyprus. At the last Home Affairs Council Cyprus called on the EU to set up an emergency mechanism to cope with the massive influx of refugees.