



EUROPEAN UNION

**Speech of HR/VP Catherine Ashton
Human Rights Council, 16th session
High-Level Segment, 28 Feb. 2011**

Mr President, Dear Ministers, Dear colleagues,

We meet at a time of historic change. Across the Middle East and beyond, people are standing up for that core human aspiration: to be able to shape their own lives, politically and economically.

They want their fundamental rights respected. They want dignity, accountability, justice and jobs. We must heed these calls. For they are just – and will not go away.

This Council therefore has a grave responsibility: to ensure that our oft-stated intentions are translated into real action, real progress

What matters in the end is not the number of resolutions passed, but results in the real world.

Right now, our attention is focused on Libya – and rightly so. The fact that so many colleagues from across the world have gathered here today tells us something big. That what is going on – the massive violence against peaceful demonstrators – shocks our conscience. It should spring us into action.

I am pleased that last Friday (25 February), this Council held a special session on Libya, showing an ability to react to events in real time. It was striking and welcome that this came about because so many groups had mobilised for it – from Asia, Latin America, as well as Eastern and Western Europe. This is the United Nations at its best.

The outcome last Friday was a strong one. I am pleased that the Council concluded on Friday to form an independent international inquiry – and also backed work underway in New York to suspend the membership of

Libya of this Council. These are important steps. But clearly more is needed.

This morning too, the message is clear: we condemn the grave human rights violations committed in Libya. The violence and repression must stop. Those responsible must be held to account. This is not just the EU's position. It is the view of the international community and its highest authority: the UN Security Council.

On Saturday, the Security Council unanimously adopted a strong Resolution, with important mandatory measures such as an arms embargo, a travel ban and asset freezes for those responsible. EU members of the Security Council worked hard to achieve an outcome that reflects the extreme urgency and severity of the situation.

Accountability and justice are essential - that is why I am pleased that agreement was found in the Resolution to refer the investigation of the on-going crimes to the International Criminal Court.

As EU we will of course ensure swift implementation of these Security Council's measures. We are already working on EU restrictive measures that should come into effect very soon.

Of course, it is not just in Libya that we need to ensure respect for basic human rights. I recently made several visits to countries across the Mediterranean where people are claiming their rights and insisting that the old ways of doing things simply won't do.

I met with government officials, members of opposition parties, civil society organisations, women's groups and youth representatives.

I went to Tunis where I met groups that had never been allowed to be in the same room before; and to Cairo where I met the young people who had been in Tahrir square. My aim was to listen and this is what I heard:

"This is our country and our revolution. We want real change – and for the system to recognise the significance of the change. Also: " This is the beginning. We need to take time to get the transition right." And then: "We want help. To ensure we get the first real election of a ruler in 7000 years. But more than that, to get genuine democracy, not just on the day we cast our ballots, but the weeks and months after that too." "We want jobs, economic opportunities and social justice, only then can we be really free".

We can and must salute the courage of people in the region for the peaceful and dignified way in which they have advanced their core demands.

But we can and must do more: to offer our full support. Only to do what people from the region ask us to. From a position of humility knowing that our own histories are full of dark pages, and that our own path to deep democracy wasn't linear or easy.

But with the conviction that in the on-going transitions, full respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms is key. Because it is the only way to get sustainable security, justice and prosperity.

Mr President,

Human rights, we often say, are universal. That is why all violations, wherever they take place, are our concern and must be addressed by this Council.

We know that in several countries, people's rights are at risk: in Iran where we have seen a steep rise in executions; in Belarus where we are deeply concerned at the number of political prisoners, in the Democratic Republic of Congo where there are distressing reports of sexual violence - and many other places besides.

The EU is also deeply concerned at the situation in the Middle East, including the occupied Palestinian Territories. We are working hard reach our long-standing aim: a negotiated solution leading to two states.

Sometimes this Council has seemed resolved only to be irresolute.

Some of the achievements of the Council perhaps do not receive the attention they deserve. Take the recent work on freedom of association; or the mechanism to promote the elimination of laws and practices that discriminate against women.

Still, this Council has some way to go in living up to the mandate it was given by the UN General Assembly. That is why we want a real, substantive outcome of the Review process now underway concerning the work of this Council.

The test of success is simple: it is not per se whether we pass resolutions or create new procedures – vital though they are.

These are the inputs. What truly matter are the outputs. The real test is whether we make a difference on the ground: whether all the people of Libya, Iran, Cote d'Ivoire and Belarus, Burma/Myanmar and DPRK are able to enjoy free speech, fair elections, the rule of law, equal rights and impartial administration.

Mr President,

The European Union is sometimes accused of trying to "export" so-called European values to other countries. I reject that accusation. The rights to free speech, freedom of assembly, justice and equality are not European rights: they are universal rights. We must never fall into the trap of believing that people in Africa, Asia or Latin America are less passionate about their rights.

Allow me to quote Kofi Annan's 2005 report, "In larger freedom". "Human rights are as fundamental to the poor as to the rich, and their protection is as important to the security and prosperity of the developed world as it is to that of the developing world".

We are meeting today precisely because those rights inspire people in every part of the globe. What is true is that many countries lack the institutions that are able to defend and promote those rights. That is why one of the great challenges facing us is to help countries build those institutions that will anchor and ensure full respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law.

Mr President,

We are living through historic times, and it is easy to be dazzled by the promise of change. Just as important is where we go from here, so I should like to look ahead to a possible direction of travel.

To live up to our promises, we need to narrow the gap:

- between the magnitude of the challenges facing us and the minutiae of our political debates;
- between the expectations of those who put us here and our ability to deliver;
- between vaulting statements of universal principles and individual lives;
- between the serenity of Geneva and events just two hours flight from here.

I repeat: what matters is not per se the number of resolutions passed but the results we achieve together on the ground.

Thank you very much