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Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the EU annual report on human rights

"I've said many times, I believe that human rights should be the silver thread that runs through all the statements and actions of the European Union. I believe that over the last twelve months, thanks in no small part to Stavros Lambrinidis and the EEAS team led by Mara Marinaki, we have made a "significant reform" in our approach, our initiatives and our actions on human rights.

Last year we adopted our strategic framework and action plan on human rights and democracy - agreed unanimously by Member States, and supported by this parliament through its high level human rights contact group.

Today we have a human rights focal point officer in every EU delegation, as well as a Brussels based working group in the council. We have fully developed human rights country strategies and have a much stronger annual report which allows parliament and civil society to measure our performance against our commitments.

The substantial restructuring of the report makes it a much more effective tool for our ongoing work. It specifically responds to the request of the parliament by following the structure of the action plan and highlighting concrete achievements and challenges.

The report also demonstrates the steps we have taken to increase our inter-institutional cooperation and our policy coherence, visibility and effectiveness across our work. I believe we have made significant progress in these areas.

I'd like to highlight especially the appointment of an EUSR for human rights - the first - under your guidance and my mandate. I pay tribute to his energy, his commitment and his determination. He has worked with over 100 Ministers and Ambassadors across the world, worked closely with you and with the teams on the ground to raise the profile of human rights. He has also worked closely with civil society in Europe and in other countries and helped to secure really important changes.

P R E S S

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The protection of NGOs and human rights defenders is a core priority of both Stavros and my mandate. He has actively engaged with over 150 international and local NGOs from 30 countries to safeguard their space to function freely and to promote our support. I thank him most warmly and look forward to many more achievements in the future.

Stavros knows better than anyone that this support is not just financial but also political, legal and diplomatic. In that regard I'd like to underline the tremendous value of the Parliament's Sakharov prize.

There is no question that the 2012 was a challenging year for civil society in many countries. There is a worrying trend in some countries to limit the space through legislation, court action and restrictions - particularly with regard to foreign funding.

I believe that safeguarding the work of civil society is fundamental to the work of the EU. I believe that safeguarding freedom of association and peaceful assembly must remain at the top of our agenda.

I have expressed our concerns on developments in statements but also in person. And I will continue to do so - and with Stavros' help and the work of our delegations we will continue to try and ensure civil society is given the space they need, and that governments - old and new; transitional or permanent understand that this is fundamental to the perception of them, fundamental to the kind of society they wish to create.

Honourable Members,

NGOs and civil society make governments and politicians uncomfortable - exactly - that is what they are supposed to do... to push the boundaries, to watch over the way governments work, to get under their skin.

In 2012 we also saw the difficulty faced by many who seek to practice their faith and have the freedom of belief, or none. We make it clear this is an inalienable human right and an essential pillar of society. It is an integral part of our political dialogues with third countries.

I have spoken out to condemn religious intolerance and discrimination - whether in Egypt, Nigeria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Tunisia and elsewhere.

Be under no doubt that our aim in speaking is to achieve results - we know, for example that the statements made in Tripoli contributed to the release of Egyptian Christians held in Libya.

The importance of this issue is why we wanted our new guidelines and why we have consulted widely to make sure that they have a strong and clear content. I am grateful again to the human rights committee for their valuable input.

I very much welcome the Andrikiene report - I trust that many of the recommendations will be reflected in the final version of the guidelines which will be adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council on 24th of June.

I have been deeply worried about the discrimination in some countries based on sexual orientation or gender identity. As you know we have contributed to the multilateral efforts especially in the UN as well as at regional and bilateral level.

We have here too developed practical EU guidelines to be adopted this month by the Council which should reinforce the work of the EU.

We have raised our deep concerns with Uganda and Cameroon about proposed parliamentary bills further criminalizing homosexuality. In Malawi we have spoken out against the prison sentences on gay couples and against recent events in Nigeria.

We use our regular dialogues to raise this discrimination and to promote tolerance - supporting campaigns in Russia, Croatia, Turkey, Montenegro and Brazil to support local and international NGOs in campaigns against discrimination.

I thank this House for your input - especially Mr Cashman for his tireless efforts.

When we look at our changing world I also continue to be concerned about what is happening to women and girls. Honourable members in this house, you know that no society can function well, no economy do as well as it should, without the input of the rich talent and ability of half its population - women and girls.

I was really pleased that we saw the successful adoption of conclusions at the recent 57th session of the UN commission on the status of women. But let me say this was not easy. Some countries tried to water down the unconditional condemnation of violence against women through appeals to - domestic traditions, laws and cultures.

It was the tireless work of our EU delegations that was largely responsible for the defeat of those attempts. We are united in our belief that there are no acceptable circumstances for violence against women. No place where the failure to allow girls to be educated is acceptable. No society that can hold its head up where women are forced to keep their heads down.

So we continue our strong engagement in implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 - with support of 200 million euros a year for the development and implementation of national action plans, funding for NGOs and training.

And we strengthened our commitment further with a memorandum of understanding with UN women that forms the basis of a partnership to help us make progress in our international commitments.

I am so grateful for the parliament's strong support in this area.

I must mention too the focus on freedom of the press and media in the report by Marietje Schaake and welcome it very much.

The increased violence against journalists and restrictions on press freedom in many countries - including our neighbours must be challenged. We condemn attacks on journalists and bloggers and are developing our own guidelines to use in our work in delegations and in our teams in Brussels.

The Commission is already implementing a pilot project mandated by the European Parliament on a European Centre for Press and Media Freedom. The territorial scope will now cover the EU27, Croatia and candidate countries.

Honourable members, we continue too with our campaign against the death penalty - I congratulate all those involved in the extensive lobbying which played a pivotal role in the success of the UNGA 67 resolution. It was adopted with an unprecedented 111 votes in favour and a record 91 sponsors. We should rightly take some credit for this.

Our revised guidelines further refine all aspects of our policy and pull together all of our available diplomatic action. During 2012 and the first part of this year I have issued 54 statements on the

death penalty: on breaches of existing moratoriums (India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Taiwan, Japan and Gambia) and on persistent executions (Iran, Saudi Arabia and China) as well as on violations of minimum standards (USA, Malaysia and Singapore). During the same period I instructed our delegations to carry out 30 demarches reiterating our position and calling on authorities to refrain from executions.

We will continue to push and press for the abolition to be universal.

Honourable members - new challenges and existing challenges ... supporting countries going through transitions, helping them not to choose to restrict human rights but to see it was for those rights that people fought and tragically died. Working with countries who describe themselves as developing so that they develop the right approach to human rights.

Most of all to remind all that for human rights to apply there is only one criteria - to be human."
