

**Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Defence**  
**20 October 2016**

**Foreign Affairs Council**

**Statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs & Trade, Mr. Charlie Flanagan, TD.**

Chairman, Members of the Committee,

I welcome the opportunity to address you here this morning on recent developments at the Foreign Affairs Council.

A large number of issues have been addressed by the Council on which I will provide an update to the Committee here this morning. In addition, I will look ahead to the Council meeting in November.

Following this I would be more than happy to address any questions the Committee may have, and hear your own perspectives on the foreign policy challenges we face.

I will begin with an overview of developments in the Middle East region.

**Syria**

The situation in Syria has remained a matter of constant concern at the Foreign Affairs Council over the past year. The EU has sought to play a positive role and to work with all parties in the planned negotiations which were convened by the UN at the start of this year. I very much regret that the Assad regime, with apparent backing from Russia and Iran, did not engage in these talks at all and devoted its energies to undermining these talks and engineering a return to violence, without any regard for the suffering of the Syrian people.

I remain firmly of the view that there is no viable military solution in Syria. Assad's total reliance on mass murder and torture shows that the only basis for his power is terrorising the Syrian people. He can never hope to hold authority through the support of the Syrian population. I expressed this recently in a speech to the Dáil and I would note that this is also the consensus view of the international community from my many discussions with my EU colleagues as well as in my recent meetings at the UN.

I believe that the only viable and sustainable way forward remains a comprehensive end to violence and a Syrian-own and Syrian-led political resolution, based on a real political transition process. That remains my objective and that of the EU, which is reflected in the conclusions adopted by the FAC at its most recent meeting on Monday last. EU Foreign Ministers called on Russia to demonstrate all efforts to halt indiscriminate bombing by the Syrian regime, restore a cessation of hostilities, ensure immediate humanitarian access and create the conditions for a credible and inclusive political transition. This is critical to save the lives of Syrian citizens, particularly those who remain in Aleppo.

**Iraq**

The situation in Iraq remains extremely challenging. The EU has repeatedly made clear its strong support for a democratic, non-sectarian, unified, and independent Iraq. There can be no peace in Iraq while Da'esh remains in control of large areas of the country, subjecting millions of Iraqis to their totalitarian and barbaric cult of hate and murder.

There will be need of major support for the victims of the conflict in Iraq, including the large numbers of Iraqis displaced by fear of Da'esh and both Ireland and the EU are assisting the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi population. The EU is working to support the implementation of the government of PM Al-Abadi in reforming Iraq to achieve the national reconciliation which is so vital to securing Iraq's future.

### **Counter-terrorism**

More broadly, the Foreign Affairs Council has discussed counter-terrorism and in particular the need to counter Da'esh on a number of recent occasions. In July, in the aftermath of the horrific Bastille Day attack on Nice, the discussions highlighted ongoing support for France, most practicably in relation to Article 42.7, first invoked following the November 2015 attacks in Paris. Ireland responded to that call for "aid and assistance" through a commitment to increase the number of Defence Forces personnel involved in the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), from 10 to 18.

The earlier Foreign Affairs Council on 23 May focused on the *Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq* and the Da'esh threat. The Conclusions unreservedly condemned the actions of Da'esh, and committed to engage in ways to prevent indiscriminate and targeted attacks, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2249. They also outlined actions to further enhance its counter-terrorism action in a human rights compliant manner, including through high level engagement with MENA countries, Turkey and the Western Balkans; reinforcing technical assistance to priority third countries in development of national strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism, as well as strengthening measures to curb the recruitment and movement of foreign fighters in particular through enhanced external border controls.

### **Middle East Peace Process**

The past year has seen continued stasis in the Middle East Peace Process. It was discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council in January and again in June, and EU Foreign Ministers also discussed it with Secretary of State Kerry in July.

Outside the Council structures, there were two developments of note.

At the beginning of June, the French Government launched an initiative to inject some much needed momentum into the peace process. I was one of ten EU Foreign Ministers to be invited to attend the initial meeting in Paris, along with others, including the US, and the UN and important regional players such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The French Government is to be commended for their efforts, which are continuing. I will support them in any way I can.

At the beginning of July, the Quartet published a long awaited report which focused on the impediment to the two-state solution presented by the continued expansion of the settlements. While the report came in for some criticism, what is clear is that if its recommendations were implemented, it would represent clear progress.

I visited the region in mid-June and met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, including Prime Minister Netanyahu and Prime Minister Hamdallah. In all of my political meetings, I made clear my support for the French initiative. In my meetings I also made clear the interest of the members of this House and of the Irish public in the Middle East Peace Process.

### **Turkey/Migration**

I was at the ASEM summit in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, when I heard of the attempted coup on 15 July. Along with other Foreign Ministers, I swiftly condemned the failed coup and the associated loss of life.

Since then, the situation in Turkey has been discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council as well as at a specially convened meeting of the Council of Europe with the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on 7 September at which I made Ireland's position clear. I reiterated that the attempted coup was an attack on democracy. I expressed my concerns that some of the actions taken since the coup are contrary to democratic norms.

The scale of the post-coup purge which has seen large numbers of people detained or suspended from their jobs, the arrests of journalists and the closure of media outlets, is very worrying. I also condemned the spate of terrorist attacks in Turkey, including those carried out by so-called Islamic State or Da'esh, the PKK or their affiliates in Turkey.

Ireland supports a stable and democratic Turkey. We understand the depth of feeling that this attack on the core of democracy in Turkey has provoked. However, it is critical that legal due process is a cornerstone of the Turkish authorities' response, and in that context, the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial is essential.

The human rights and basic freedoms of minorities, including the Kurdish minority, must also be upheld as core principles. It is critically important for all sides to cease hostilities and return to dialogue so that the political process to resolve the Kurdish issue can be resumed.

The EU and Turkey are working together to address the challenges of the migration crisis, where Turkey plays an invaluable role, as host to approximately 3 million refugees. Migration remains a key challenge facing the European Union. The EU has made substantial progress in addressing the migration crisis through a range of measures including its Relocation Programme; the deal that EU leaders agreed with Turkey; dialogues with countries of origin and transit to tackle the root causes of migration; and Operation Sophia to deal with the problem of people smuggling in the Mediterranean.

The deal agreed with Turkey by EU Heads of State and Government in March 2016 has been a major element in the EU's migration response. The significant reduction in the number of lives lost in the Aegean Sea as well as the reduction in the number of migrants entering the EU from Turkey since the deal was agreed suggests that it is achieving its aims. The need to comply with EU and international law was at the heart of the discussions leading to the deal and this issue was a matter of deep concern to us.

We in Ireland have been playing our part. We have resettled 486 refugees from Lebanon while 69 Syrians have been relocated from Greece, a number I expect to rise to 60-80 people per month soon. We can be extremely proud of the work undertaken by our naval service in the Mediterranean, who have rescued over 13,000 people. We have also provided €62 million to date in humanitarian assistance to Syrians and the region since 2012 and contributed to other humanitarian funds.

Last month, Ireland co-facilitated a UN Summit in New York to address large movements of refugees and migrants, with the aim of bringing countries together behind a more humane and coordinated approach to the issue. The results of the Summit (*the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*) will now be built on with the aim of securing international agreements on both Refugees and Migrants in 2018.

## **Ukraine**

Turning now to the Eastern neighbourhood of the EU, the Council had a discussion in January on Ukraine where the focus was on the country's reform process. Ministers acknowledged the significant achievement of the government in moving forward with the reform programme in very challenging circumstances. At the same time, they stressed the need for continued implementation of key reform measures, in particular those related to the justice sector, public administration, decentralisation and the fight against corruption.

Ministers underlined the significant assistance being provided for the reform efforts by the European Commission and Member States. They also agreed that the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, in place since 1 January 2016, opened up new opportunities for Ukraine to benefit economically from closer trading links with the EU. The Council reiterated the EU's strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its continued commitment to help end the conflict in the Donbas region. The need to move forward on implementation of the Minsk agreements was also highlighted.

On Monday last, I met Foreign Minister Klimkin at a Friends of Ukraine meeting which took place before the FAC. The Minister provided an update on the current security situation in eastern Ukraine and the important political and economic reforms that the Ukrainian government have introduced. I assured Minister Klimkin of Ireland's full support for Ukraine as it continues on a reform path that is difficult but necessary for the future prosperity of the country.

## **Russia**

At the meeting of the FAC in March, Ministers had a comprehensive exchange on EU relations with Russia. There was broad agreement that a change in the relationship was not warranted, given Russia's continued support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine and its role in the Syrian conflict.

Ministers approved a set of five principles to guide EU policy towards Russia, including confirmation that implementation of the Minsk Agreements would be a key condition for any substantial change in the EU's stance. It was also agreed that the EU would step up support for Russian civil society and strengthen people-to-people contacts.

Ministers acknowledged that selective engagement with Russia could be pursued on foreign policy issues and specific sectoral areas of interest to the EU. I underlined Ireland's full support for the guiding principles and stressed the importance of continued EU unity in our dealings with Russia. On economic sanctions, there was broad agreement that the lack of progress on Minsk implementation and Russia's unwillingness to engage constructively in the Trilateral Contact Group negotiations made it inevitable that the restrictive measures would remain in place.

Since the March discussion, developments have taken a turn for the worse. In June, the Council extended the EU economic sanctions for a further six months to 31 January 2017. The decision was taken in light of the deteriorating security situation in eastern Ukraine with

daily firefights between the Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian armed forces. Indeed, according to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, August recorded the highest number of ceasefire violations in the past 12 months.

Intensive efforts within the framework of the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group to make progress on the security and political strands of the Minsk agreements have made little headway. The situation has improved somewhat in the past four weeks after both sides agreed to a back-to-school truce on 1 September, which is largely holding. Agreement was also reached last month on a roadmap which envisages moving forward on parallel political and security tracks. The first step involves implementation of a disengagement plan, initially at three key locations before being rolled out along the entire contact line.

I believe it is vital that the disengagement plan is implemented speedily as without a secure ceasefire there is no prospect of the Ukraine government agreeing to move forward with legislative proposals for the holding of local elections in the Donbas and the granting of special status to the region - two key provisions of the Minsk agreements.

It is too early to assess if this latest initiative, on which OSCE, French and German negotiators have worked so hard, will result in a secure ceasefire and the full withdrawal of weapons. Hopes have been raised before of a breakthrough, only to be quickly dashed.

Later today, the European Council will have a strategic discussion on relations with Russia. Given the lack of progress in eastern Ukraine and Russia's military actions in Syria, a change in the EU's position is not expected.

### **Eastern Partners/ Belarus/Moldova**

An Eastern Partnership Ministerial meeting was held prior to the FAC in May and EU Foreign Ministers met again with the Foreign Ministers of the six Eastern Partner countries at the informal FAC in Bratislava in September.

The Eastern Partnership will also be discussed at the FAC in November. The EU supports reform to meet the expectations of the Moldovan people and continues to press for improvements in the human rights situation in Belarus. The November FAC is expected to consider the conduct and outcome of recent elections in both countries.

### **EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy**

In order to assist the EU to meet both the challenges and opportunities posed by ongoing instability in the international context, the High Representative presented a new EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy to the June European Council.

The preparation of this new Strategy was led by the HRVP. She consulted closely with the Member States, but presented the Strategy on her own responsibility to the June European Council. Ireland was actively engaged in the consultation process for the Strategy, including at the Foreign Affairs Council.

The Strategy sets out a vision for the EU's foreign and security policy, and commits the European Union to promoting peace, prosperity, democracy and the rule of law. It aims to

mobilise all aspects of the EU's external action – diplomatic, economic development, trade and peacekeeping - in pursuit of coherent policy objectives. Irish perspectives and concerns have been taken on board to a large extent in the document.

The Strategy stresses the importance of promoting and protecting human rights, development cooperation, conflict resolution and global governance to address the root causes of the challenges such as migration and extremism, currently facing the European Union. Other positive elements from an Irish perspective include a focus on the Middle East Peace Process, disarmament, gender, the UN and importance of multilateralism more generally.

The June European Council welcomed the presentation of the strategy and invited the High Representative, the Commission and the Council to take the work forward. These Conclusions make clear that any implementation of the Strategy will be negotiated and agreed with the Member States.

Last Monday, at the Foreign Affairs Council, I emphasised that all strands of the Strategy should be progressed to realise its stated ambition to promote “*Peace and Security, prosperity, democracy and a rules-based global order.*” I also welcomed the commitment in the Strategy to continue to mainstream human rights; women, peace and security and gender equality in EU policies. These two important elements were reflected in the Conclusions adopted by EU Foreign Ministers.

An implementation plan for the security and defence strand of the Strategy will be presented to Foreign and Defence Ministers at the November FAC meeting. This will focus on enhancing the EU's peace-keeping capacity in support of the United Nations through the further development of the Common Security and Defence Policy as defined in the Lisbon Treaty.

### **Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**

The worrying situation in the Former Republic of Macedonia was discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council (20 June 2016). Along with our European partners, we remain concerned about the ongoing political instability, but welcome the efforts of the political parties to redress the situation and introduce reforms. We are very pleased that the political parties have agreed that elections can now take place on 11 December. I also had a bilateral meeting with the Macedonian Foreign Minister Mr Nikola Poposki en merge of the OSCE Ministerial (Potsdam, 1 September), at which I recognised the efforts of the political parties in implementing the July agreement and urged them to continue the commitment to reform and progress.

### **China**

I welcomed the adoption of the Council Conclusions on China at the FAC on 18 July which provide the policy framework for EU engagement with China over the coming years.

I also welcomed the outcomes of the EU-China Summit, held in Beijing on 12-13 July. A number of items were discussed at the FAC on 18 July including the verdict of the Court of Arbitration in The Hague on the South China Sea maritime dispute between China and the Philippines; foreign policy issues including bilateral security cooperation; the EU's China Strategy and the positive prospects for enhanced EU-China co-operation; China's desire for WTO Market Economy Status (MES); Brexit; and human rights. Ireland continues to support a broad, positive approach to continuing cooperation with China and stresses the need to speak with one voice on China – this will help both sides focus on the challenges and opportunities arising from the relationship.

## **Colombia**

The Foreign Affairs Council last discussed Colombia in April, when we had an opportunity to receive a briefing from the Colombian Government's High Commissioner for Peace, Mr Sergio Jaramillo, and from EU Special Envoy to the Colombian Peace Process, Mr Eamon Gilmore. We also briefly discussed progress in the peace talks at the FAC in July. As you know, there have been significant developments in the months since then, not least the conclusion of negotiations between the Government and the FARC, the signature of a peace agreement, and its subsequent unexpected narrow rejection by the people of Colombia in a plebiscite on 2 October.

The message that we have been stressing to our Colombian interlocutors is that the decision of the Colombian electorate to narrowly reject the peace agreement must not deter the two sides from pursuing peace. As we know from our own experience here in Ireland, peace processes are difficult, complicated and can suffer unexpected setbacks. They are not linear. We are therefore urging all parties in Colombia to remain committed to the peace process and focused on their ultimate objective of bringing peace to their country. I am pleased to see that the various parties have begun a process of consultation in order to identify how the process might move forward. The role of EU Special Envoy Gilmore is of particular importance in that regard and he has been working with both sides in Havana to encourage constructive solutions.

In meetings at EU level in the weeks since the plebiscite, Ireland has been to the fore in encouraging the EU to maintain a positive approach. We have made clear Ireland's intentions to remain fully committed to supporting the Colombian peace process including through supporting Special Envoy Gilmore, assisting the efforts of NGOs working to promote and defend human rights, and facilitating Colombian access to lessons learned from the peace process in Northern Ireland.

## **Latin America and the Caribbean**

More broadly, developments in Latin America and the Caribbean were discussed briefly at the Foreign Affairs Council in July and the main focus, aside from the Colombian Peace Process, was the humanitarian situation in Venezuela and the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA) with Cuba.

*On Venezuela*, Council Conclusions were agreed which called for an urgent, constructive and effective dialogue between the Venezuelan government and the parliamentary majority to address the country's many challenges going forward. Ireland, along with the rest of the EU Member States, remains concerned about the humanitarian situation in Venezuela and in particular issues connected with human rights defenders and civil and political rights.

*On Cuba*, it is hoped that the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement between Cuba and the EU will be signed by the end of this year, and it is further anticipated that a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding between Cuba and Ireland will also be finalised before 2017. These advances are evidence of an ongoing rapprochement between Cuba and the EU, as

well as Cuba's reopening to the world in more general terms, which indeed we warmly welcome.

On the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York this September, I was delighted to have bilateral meetings with the Foreign Ministers of Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Argentina, as well as the Vice Foreign Minister of Bolivia. This is all part of a stepping up of our engagement with the region, as foreseen by the Programme for Government.

### **Climate Diplomacy**

Ireland supported the Council Conclusions for continued climate diplomacy in 2016 agreed at the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) held in Brussels on 15 February 2016.

Ireland's commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate is underlined by our own national response in terms of policy and legislation and the respective planning processes we have underway for both mitigation and adaptation.

It was also demonstrated when Ireland agreed to the EU ratifying the Paris Agreement ahead of other MS, including Ireland. This contributed to the upcoming entry into force of the Paris Agreement which will take place on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2016. We have this week also started the process to ratify the Paris Agreement.

At COP21 in Paris the Taoiseach committed Ireland to scaling up climate finance and announced that Ireland will provide at least €175 million in public funding, mainly for adaptation in developing countries by 2020 and additional contributions to the Least Developed Countries Fund.

In 2015 my Department provided €36 million to the poorest countries of the world for climate related development programmes and a contribution of €1 million per year is now being provided to the Least Developed Countries Fund.

### **Sahel**

Ireland supported the adoption of the Sahel Council Conclusions in June, which reaffirmed the commitment of the EU to the region. Support for the Malian peace process remains essential for a stable and secure Sahel. As a number of terrorist attacks across the G5 Sahel countries; Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, have reminded us, terrorism remains a critical issue in the region.

The Council condemned attacks on civilians and members of the UN peacekeeping force in Mali, MINUSMA. It also supported a comprehensive approach to tackling other challenges faced by the countries in the Sahel, including development, irregular migration and organised crime.

Ireland has supported the comprehensive EU position in the Sahel in a number of ways. There are currently 18 members of the Irish Defence Forces participating in the EU Training

Mission in Mali in its mission to assist in the reconstruction of effective and accountable Malian armed forces. Furthermore, Ireland supports the civilian mission in Mali, EUCAP Sahel Mali, in its mission to ensure constitutional and democratic order and fulfilling conditions for a lasting peace in Mali, through the deployment of two advisers to the mission.

To further show our commitment to security in the region, the Minister of State at the Department of Defence, Paul Kehoe, T.D., will visit Mali on October 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>. Ireland has also participated in technical discussions regarding the migration compacts and proposed programme actions of the EU Trust Fund for Africa, to which we have also committed €3 million for the 2016-2020 period. In addition, Irish Aid has provided over €16 million in humanitarian and development funding to the G5 Sahel countries since 2013.

Chairman, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for your time and your patience in allowing me to review what I think you will agree has been a very varied and diverse agenda which the Foreign Affairs Council has faced in recent months.

I have focussed my remarks on the Foreign Affairs Council's deliberations as agreed. I would be happy to address any questions that you may have and look forward to hearing your own perspectives on these issues and others which you might wish to raise.

ENDS