

Catherine Ashton

High Representative of the Union for  
Foreign Affairs and Security Policy  
Vice President of the European Commission

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



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**FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL MUST PRIORITISE HUMAN RIGHTS  
IN CAR, SYRIA, EGYPT, SOUTH SUDAN, AFGHANISTAN AND RUSSIA**

Dear Baroness Ashton,

Ahead of the Foreign Affairs Council on Monday 20 January, Amnesty International calls on you to ensure that human rights remain at the centre of European Union (EU) external policy and action in all countries on the agenda, including Central African Republic (CAR), Syria, Egypt, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Russia.

In **CAR**, the population has been subjected to unlawful killings, looting and destruction of physical property since fighting started in December 2013. Over 1000 people have been killed, and over 700,000 displaced out of a population of 4.6 million. Humanitarian aid has been limited in scope and hampered by the lack of safe access. Protection of civilians is also sorely lacking. Despite the presence of the African-led International Support Mission to Central African Republic (MISCA) and French troops, the population remains highly vulnerable. What remains of the state has utterly failed to offer effective protection to all communities without distinction. The civilian population urgently needs physical protection and humanitarian assistance. Militias and other armed groups must be disarmed and there must be an end to impunity.

*As a key and long term partner in peace-building, development and humanitarian aid in CAR, the EU and its member states have a pivotal role to play. The EU must continue to increase financing and political backing to MISCA and United Nations peacekeeping to ensure the protection of civilians. The EU and member states must step up concrete action on human rights and protection of civilians in CAR to address the fundamental problem of the crisis. Any EU mission must explicitly prioritise the protection of civilians and human rights, and act in full respect of international humanitarian and human rights law. Even as global peacekeeping capacities are currently challenged by multiple crises and political priorities may shift elsewhere in near future, the EU and its member states have a vital role in catalysing and ensuring a sustained international effort to promote human rights and protection of civilians in CAR, in line with EU commitments to place human rights at the foreground of all external action.*

In **Syria**, continuing violence has sparked one of the biggest humanitarian crises in recent history. Millions of civilians are suffering, many of whom are at risk of starvation and face severe shortages of medical care and adequate shelter. About 6.5 million people are internally displaced and another 2.3 million (48% of them children) have fled Syria - the vast majority of them being hosted in neighbouring countries. So far, international efforts to resettle refugees have been inadequate. Refugees fled Syria at a rate of 5,000 people a day in 2013, which means that the EU has not even offered places to the amount of people fleeing Syria over three days.

*The EU must act to significantly increase the number of resettlement and humanitarian admission places for refugees from Syria, as well as the provision of safe and legal passage for Syrian asylum seekers wishing to travel to EU member states. In parallel, the EU, its member states, and the international community must continue to provide support to countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees, particularly Jordan and Lebanon.*

In recent months, the human rights situation in **Egypt** further deteriorated and the space for dissenting voices has been shrinking. A number of perceived opponents across the political spectrum were convicted in politically-motivated trials and/or were imprisoned for peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. The crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters persisted and intensified towards the end of 2013. In the run-up to the referendum, the Egyptian authorities showed little tolerance for a "No" campaign as exemplified in the arrests of political activists calling for a "No" vote.

*Both in dialogue with Egypt and in its public positioning, the EU must raise strong concerns on the current and past human rights violations, particularly of the right of freedom of expression, assembly and association. The EU must also call on the Egyptian authorities to ensure that any mechanism established to address past human rights*

*abuses is effective, independent and impartial, and set up in accordance with human rights law and standards; its findings must also be made public. In addition, the Egyptian authorities must allow their human rights record reviewed by independent human rights experts and bodies.*

In **South Sudan**, over 1000 people have been killed, scores injured, and 189,000 people displaced since mid-December 2013. Civilians have been deliberately targeted in the conflict or caught up in reckless and indiscriminate use of fire, while captured combatants have reportedly been unlawfully killed. Humanitarian access for civilians in these dire conditions remains hampered by ongoing fighting.

*The EU must use all available tools to immediately end revenge attacks, facilitate humanitarian assistance countrywide, and ensure full investigation and accountability for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. Any final negotiated settlement must include accountability for targeted killings and other abuses (including for those with command responsibility) to reassure civilians from all communities that their government, security services, armed forces and justice system represent them equally.*

In **Afghanistan**, as the security transition continues and the international community's role changes, Afghan civil society and human rights defenders (HRDs) will become ever more important in pressing for respect for human rights and holding the Afghan government to account. Several recent cases suggest that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) are at increased risk. In line with EU guidelines, the EU and its member states must act to support and protect all HRDs. Concrete steps include:

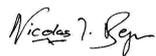
1. *Raising concern about the security and rights of WHRDs to conduct their work, in the Afghanistan Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on January 27*
2. *Urging the Afghan government to reinforce the independence and capacity of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) as a key institution supporting and protecting HRDs and civil society*
3. *Developing and pro-actively implementing country specific plans for HRDs in Afghanistan, including a gender analysis and with particular reference to the challenges faced by WHRDs*

In **Russia**, the human rights situation has progressively deteriorated since 2012, with a continuing clampdown on the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association in particular. Thousands of people have been detained following protests in and around Moscow. While several prisoners of conscience were released following the latest amnesty law of 18 December 2013 and a presidential pardon, many still remain behind bars. Across Russia around 1000 and possibly more non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been targeted with "inspections". Many face the risk of fines and closure under the new "foreign agents law". Discriminatory legislation introduced within the last year has fuelled homophobia and prompted a wave of violence by vigilante groups country-wide. Attacks by armed groups continue to occur across the North Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia and the ensuing security response continues to be marked by gross human rights violations, including enforced disappearances and torture, and alleged extra-judicial executions.

*The EU must raise human rights concerns, at every opportunity with the Russian authorities, including at the forthcoming EU-Russia Summit, particularly regarding violations of freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and violations of fair trial rights. Concretely, the EU must specifically call for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience. These calls must be backed up with concrete action by the EU delegation and member state missions in Russia, including by monitoring and reporting on specific cases and wider human rights issues (including in the North Caucasus), trial monitoring, and support to human rights defenders.*

We look forward to your response and stand ready to provide any further information you may require.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Nicolas Beger  
Director

Cc:  
Suvi Seppäläinen, Advisor to the High Representative on Human Rights  
Stavros Lambrinidis, EU Special Representative on Human Rights