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NOTE

from:	General Secretariat of the Council
to:	Delegations
Subject:	Summary record of the meeting of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) held in Strasbourg on 18 April 2013

The meeting was chaired by Mr Brok (EPP, DE) and Mr Provera (EFD, IT).

**Exchange of views with Laurent Fabius, French Minister for Foreign Affairs, on the situation
in the Sahel and in Syria**

Minister Fabius provided extensive information about the developments in Mali and Syria. Regarding Mali, he recalled the events which had led to France's intervention and highlighted the success of the French intervention which had re-established and significantly improved the security situation. He then pointed out the next steps needed: conversion of the Africa-led International Support Mission for Mali (MISMA) into a UN peace-keeping mission (UNSC resolution to be adopted soon) and the consequent reduction of the number of French soldiers on the ground (ultimately up to 1000 staff with the specific task of supporting the stabilisation mission if

necessary), training of Malian forces by the EUTM, state building activities (democratic permanent, functioning structures; dialogue between the North and the South; reconciliation), holding presidential elections in July to be followed by parliamentary elections afterwards, as well as economic development. He made it clear that France had intervened because it was able and disposed to do so, yet lessons had to be learned, despite the support provided by many Member States. Regarding Syria, he stressed that it was very difficult not to be pessimistic about the appalling situation on the ground. He considered that the current situation could lead to the explosion of Syria, which would have significant regional consequences. He warned that although the most radical elements were not in the majority now in the Syrian resistance, they could gain control if the conflict carried on. He underlined the frightening perspective that the regime could use chemical weapons. Minister Fabius insisted that the only solution was a political one and he stressed that institutions had to continue to be fully operational in order to avoid a crash. As regards the weapons embargo, he recalled that only the EU respected it and it therefore had limited effects, adding that the issue would be discussed again within the EU before the end of May.

Following the Minister's introductory statement, there were two rounds of questions and answers. Regarding Mali, numerous MEPs explicitly expressed their thanks to France for its intervention. Some MEPs (in particular Mr Danjean (EPP, FR) and Mr Preda (EPP, RO)) questioned the planned timetable (sequence of French troops' withdrawal-elections-UN peace-keeping mission deployment). Ms De Keyser (S&D, BE) mentioned the border issue for Mali's neighbours. Concerning Syria, many MEPs' statements from nearly all political groups concerned the lifting of the arms embargo and possible consequences. A number of speakers (e.g. Ms Neyst-Uyttebroeck (ALDE, BE), Ms Brantner (Greens/EFA, DE), Ms Romero López (S&D, ES)) criticised the EU's humanitarian aid, which seemed not to reach the targeted recipients.

In reply, Minister Fabius said that the lifting of the arms embargo on Syria was a complicated issue with arguments on both sides. He said that the aim of lifting it was to provide help to the resistance forces so that they could defend themselves. He added that within the resistance there were some reasonable forces but if the support did not reach them, then extremists could gain the upper hand. Minister Fabius insisted that Bashar Al-Assad needed to know that he could not win. As regards the issue of arms provided falling into the wrong hands, he stated that this was currently being looked at

with a view to the May decision. Concerning humanitarian assistance in Syria, he stressed that France had tried from the very beginning to provide assistance to the areas liberated and that the EU was doing a lot. He added that many Member States were currently working on the post-Al-Assad period. Concerning Mali and the planned timetable, Minister Fabius recalled that the security situation had significantly improved, though he admitted that organising elections would not be an easy task, yet absolutely necessary. He reported that the current government and the president were only transitional, adding that the latter wanted these elections. He excluded any more ambitious timetable. Minister Fabius pointed out that the future decisions could only be taken by a new government which would be free of any doubts as regards its democratic legitimacy. Concerning the border security issue of Mali's neighbouring countries, he said that Algeria as well as Mauritania were fully aware of the importance of this issue and that they had demonstrated their willingness to put in the necessary (military) resources. In reply to the critical comments on the CSDP made by Ms De Sarnez (ALDE, FR), he explained that the weaknesses shown were not surprising as the CSDP was still at the beginning of its process and much still needed to be done. Concerning the general question of CSDP mission funding raised by Ms Gomes (S&D, PT), he replied that this issue could be considered at the December European Council, adding that it was impossible to run foreign policy by looking only at financial implications. On the EU's humanitarian aid, Minister Fabius said that the EU was very active, via the EEAS as well as the Commission, yet this was insufficient. He added that it was also a question of timing and recognised that not all aid arrived where it was intended.
