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**NOTE**

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from :	General Secretariat of the Council
to :	Delegations
Subject:	Summary of the plenary session of the European Parliament, held in Strasbourg on 17 April 2012

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**Human rights in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter**

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The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ms Ashton, delivered the speech set out in the Annex.

The rapporteur, Mr Howitt (S&D, UK), outlined some of the demands of the Parliament: the appointment of a Special Representative for human rights, a timetable for setting up human rights focal points in all EU delegations, and increased transparency of EU human rights policies. He added that the EU should also use the 'less for less' strategy in its relationship with its partners and not refrain from suspending international agreements. The rapporteur also pointed out some areas of disagreement within the Parliament on subjects such as the investigation of war crimes in Gaza, women's rights, discrimination against all religions and justice for the victims of extraordinary rendition. He added that the Parliament report also examined the issues of social media and of business and human rights.

Mr Preda (EPP, RO), on behalf of the Committee on Development, thanked the rapporteur. He welcomed the joint communication on the review of the EU human rights strategy and stressed the need for budget allocations for human rights activities.

For the political groups, the following speakers took the floor:

- Mr Grzyb (EPP, PL) welcomed the Parliament's annual report and said that its delayed adoption was justified since much had happened in 2011 in terms of human rights. He stressed the importance of the Arab Spring. He welcomed the fact that the report referred to some critical points such as Belarus and that it condemned the persecution of minorities. He was of the opinion that corporate responsibility should be part of EU policy in its relations with third countries.
- Ms Koppa (S&D, EL) congratulated the rapporteur on his work. She put particular emphasis on the monitoring of human rights. She recalled the EU's former foreign policy towards some African states and said that stability could only be achieved if human rights were respected. She therefore welcomed the inclusion of human rights clauses in all EU trade agreements with third countries. Ms Koppa furthermore emphasised the toleration of all religions and women's rights.
- Mr Donskis (ALDE, LT) also praised the rapporteur for his work and pointed out that the report stressed the question of the place of human rights and their mainstreaming in all EU policies. He believed that the report covered almost all sensitivities and expectations within the Parliament. He believed that in addition to obvious human rights violations on which the Parliament had a common view, there were also other forms, less obvious, which would be the main challenge for the future.
- Mr Tavares (Greens/EFA, PT) criticised the fact that the EU was selling arms and thereby infringing international law, referring in particular to Guinea-Bissau. He considered the Parliament report to be excellent as it had adopted the right approach.

- Mr Szymanski (ECR, PL) drew attention to freedom of religion violations and the persecution of Christians despite existing legal obligations, and said that the EU should remind its partners of these. He added that the report should not refer to reproductive health.
- Mr Belder (EFD, IT) pointed to the abduction and forced conversion of Christians to Islam in Egypt. He said that the EU should support them and respond in an appropriate manner.
- Ms Vergiat (GUE/NGL, FR) congratulated the rapporteur. She defended the view that the EU had to bring its internal and external policies in line with human rights and put an end to its hypocrisy. She did not share the rapporteur's positive assessment of the High Representative's action, in particular as regards the European Neighbourhood Policy.
- Mr Claeys (NI, NL) focused on the situation of white farmers in South Africa, which had been left out of the Parliament's report. She said that there was a systematic campaign against these farmers and that the EU should avoid further escalation and suspend its aid to South Africa.

The individual interventions by Members showed broad support for the report. However some Members (e.g. Mr Salafranca (EPP, ES) and Ms Costello (S&D, IE)) referred to some issues which had not been addressed. The issue of persecution of Christians was raised by many Members (e.g. Mr Brok (EPP, DE), Mr Posselt (EPP, DE), Mr Provera (EFD, IT), Mr Kowal (ECR, PL)), who considered that the Parliament report should not be silent on this subject and that the EU had a particular responsibility in this regard. Other Members raised some specific issues, in particular women's rights (Ms Senyszyn (S&D, PL) and Ms Matera (EPP, IT)) and LGBT (e.g. Ms De Keyser (S&D, BE) and Ms Gomes (S&D, PT)). A number of Members (e.g. Ms Gomes, Mr Salafranca and Ms Costello) called upon the High Representative to appoint a Special Representative for human rights. Similarly, some Members (e.g. Ms Băsecu (EPP, RO) and Ms De Keyser) asked for mechanisms for measuring human rights progress to be introduced. Some speakers pointed out that the EU should be consistent in its approach as regards human rights both externally and internally.

In reply, High Representative Ashton addressed several points: she agreed with some of the concerns related to faith, belief, and conviction; the ability to worship and exercise a belief, faith or none; and shared the view that this issue should be a core part of the work on human rights. She gave assurance that the EEAS was following closely the situation in Egypt. Regarding the EU Special Representative for human rights, she reported that the work on the mandate and the appointment was ongoing. In her opinion, the person appointed needed to develop a good relationship with the Parliament.

In his concluding remarks, the rapporteur stated that although he agreed with the concerns relating to the persecution of Christians, the persecution had not started with the Arab Spring. He therefore called on the Parliament to condemn discrimination against all religions and beliefs in all countries.

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**Speech by High Representative Catherine Ashton, Strasbourg, 17 April 2012**

Madam President, since 1983, when the European Parliament began adopting an annual report and resolution on human rights, this House has done more than any EU institution to focus on such issues.

While we may sometimes disagree about how best to champion respect for human rights globally, we stand united in our aim: to see a freer world, where people's dignity is respected— wherever they may be from – and for the EU, and the External Action Service in particular, to play a key role in supporting people's struggles for their rights.

Allow me now to turn to the report by Richard Howitt which is before us today. First of all, I want to congratulate him for achieving consensus across the political spectrum on this report. I believe it is essential reading for me, my colleagues in the Commission and my colleagues in the Council. The very first paragraph of the report is about coherence between the internal and external policies of the European Union – one of the main themes from the Communication of December. It is a particularly important theme for Parliament this week, since on Thursday it will hear statements from the Council and the Commission on the European Union's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights.

Honourable members, 'coherence' might sound dry, but this really does mean that human rights can be woven into everything we do, in Europe and beyond. It means making sure that people everywhere benefit from the same universal rights, regardless of who they are or where they live.

The report also highlights the importance of accountability and the importance of our work in developing, in serious situations, the accountability that we have. I will pick out two themes that in a sense are very important both for coherence and accountability. Firstly, the role of women, especially as yesterday I met Michelle Bachelet to talk about the role of women and to sign agreements with UN Women on how to go forward and support women across the world.

Secondly – especially at the present time – discrimination against people of faith, including Christians, and those who have other beliefs. Tolerance is at the heart of the European Union, and that is why we need to strengthen our policy on the freedom of religion or belief, which is fundamental to a free society.

The European Union must work continuously for the widest possible ratification, acceptance and approval of, and accession to, the Rome Statute. That work is progressing. So far, we have signed three bilateral agreements, including ICC clauses, and initialled another three, and we are negotiating another 15. We have also included ICC clauses in many of our ENP action plans.

We have the power to promote human rights by placing countries and regimes on a scale stretching between engagement and isolation and using human rights as a method of measuring how we should address our relationships with different countries.

Human rights have never been more important than they are now, nor indeed have they ever driven so many changes. If we simply look, for example, at what is happening throughout the Middle East and North Africa, men and women, young and old, representing the whole of society, have found the courage to assert their fundamental human rights. Some have been prepared to give their lives for freedom, dignity and a better future. I should like to pay tribute to all of them now.

The changes that they have brought, as Mr Howitt has said, required the EU to develop anew response to a changing neighbourhood. I believe we have risen to that challenge. Human rights and deep democracy are at the heart of our new approach, and I believe our partnerships with our neighbours are stronger and healthier as a result.

Our work at the UN Human Rights Council has also helped to reinforce and support these positive and domestically-driven developments. At the 19th session, which concluded on 28 March, the European Union resolution on Syria was adopted with a record vote of 41 in favour, out of a possible 47. Our resolution on human rights in Burma/Myanmar was adopted by consensus, as was the resolution on freedom of religion or belief.

The session was a success for the rights of individuals, who too often find themselves marginalised and ostracised. The successful panel on ‘Violence and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity’ was a remarkable achievement, for which all credit is due to South Africa’s leadership, together with Ban Ki-moon. It is unacceptable that 80 states still criminalise same-sex relations between consenting adults, and that seven even foresee the death penalty. This is totally incompatible with international human rights law.

I believe it is very, very important that Barbara Lochbihler and Laima Andrikiene were able to attend the Human Rights Council, where they addressed EU Heads of Mission and met with a wide range of international representatives. This is just another example of the important role of the European Parliament and the important way in which it is seen to promote human rights in the world.

My Communication of last December was designed as a contribution to what is an ongoing discussion within and between EU institutions on a more effective and comprehensive approach to human rights and democracy. Now that there has been time to consider what I put forward, I look forward to working with you on the shape of our future strategy.

As I confirmed to the Committee on Foreign Affairs on 20 March, work is in hand to pave the way for the appointment of a Special Representative for Human Rights as part of a package to put into practice the Joint Communication. It is important that this person be someone with a strong track record on international human rights.

At the same time, as was discussed at the ‘Gymnich’ meeting of foreign ministers, we want to agree a political declaration on what we want to achieve, and we want an action plan on how to put this into practice. This will bring together new initiatives as well as others that we have already launched. I am happy to confirm that the network of human rights focal points is nearly complete: 116 EU Delegations now have someone, and many have two, in both their political and cooperation sections.

On all of this, I want to work closely with the honourable Members. The review of EU human rights policy was first announced in this House. The appointment of a Special Representative was championed by this House. It is therefore natural that ongoing work on human rights and democracy should be in full cooperation with this House. I have written to the Chair of the Human Rights Sub-Committee to ask her to work with me to ensure the fullest possible participation in the drafting of the Joint Declaration.

To end as I began, I pay tribute to Mr Howitt for his work and I pay tribute to the European Parliament for its continuous work in support of human rights.