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Brussels, 11 June 2012
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Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

I wish to thank you for your letter of 8 May 2012 on the difficult situation of human rights in Bahrain.

I share your concerns about this situation and on the limited progress made on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Bassiouni Commission report. I have publicly voiced my concerns at the overall situation, and of individual cases, in numerous statements issued since February 2011. Furthermore, I have discussed these issues with the Bahraini authorities, at the highest level, several times.

Let me also mention that, since the current crisis erupted last year, I have asked my Advisor Mr Robert Cooper and European External Action Service Managing Director Mr Hugues Mingarelli to visit the country and hold talks with both government and opposition representatives. Mr Mingarelli last travelled to Manama on 17 May 2012; on that occasion he conveyed EU messages to all his interlocutors, notably on the urgent necessity to engage in a constructive and meaningful dialogue, to abstain from all forms of violence and to address the problems highlighted by the Bassiouni Commission with no further delays. Representatives of the EU Delegation based in Riyadh, also accredited to Bahrain, visits the country on a regular basis.

A number of official demarches have also been carried out to express EU's deep concerns at the situation of human rights and on individual cases, including that of Mr Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, on a hunger strike since the beginning of February. The latest demarche was delivered by the German ambassador in Manama, in her capacity as local representative of the EU, at the end of April this year. Mr Mingarelli visited Mr Al Khawaja in prison during his last visit.

At the multilateral level, the EU has raised its concerns through Human Rights Council, at each of its sessions since February 2011. Finally, the EU is drawing up proposals for concrete support to the government of Bahrain to improve human rights awareness and compliance in some ministries. We hope to be able to start implementing this project as soon as possible.

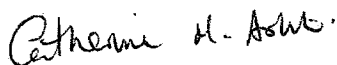
The EU will continue to discuss the situation in Bahrain whenever possible. A good opportunity will be the upcoming EU-GCC Ministerial meeting that will take place on 25 June in Luxembourg.

I shall persist in using this wide range of instruments in a continuous effort to deliver positive results. I have taken note of your request to consider imposing restrictive measures against Bahrain but, as you are certainly aware, the EU considers them a last resort, a difficult decision to be taken only when all other possibilities have not worked.

One of the EU's overriding goals is to help persuade Bahrain's government and communities to come together in meaningful dialogue, as this offers the only viable path towards a sustainable improvement in the situation. We are consistently pressing this point on the Bahraini government and opposition groups. The adoption of restrictive measures against the government at this stage may very well reduce rather than increase our potential to help foster such dialogue.

Finally, as for restricting arms exports, the Honourable members are reminded that all licence applications submitted after the outbreak of last year's demonstrations have been processed on a strict case-by-case basis against the criteria of Common Position 2008/944/CFSP, which foresees denial of export licences under several conditions including respect for human rights, the likelihood that the equipment might be used for internal repression, the internal situation of the country, and risk of regional destabilisation. The Common Position thus allows Member States to deny, when appropriate, arms and equipment transfers even when the destination country is not under any formal embargo.

Yours sincerely



Catherine Ashton