

# Address to the SA Division Liberal Party Budget Lunch

## **PRIME MINISTER:**

Well thank you very much Christopher, you are very, very generous. I want to thank you and we had a great outing this morning down at Osborne with Marise Payne, the Defence Minister and I'll say a bit more about this commitment to Naval shipbuilding and the release of the Naval Shipbuilding Plan but this is truly a national enterprise. This is securing our future, our future security in a physical sense, giving the Navy the capabilities it needs, but also building that sovereign industrial capacity that Australia needs and South Australia needs. So it was great to be there this morning with you Christopher and you've done phenomenal work in bringing this defence industry plan to fruition.

I want to acknowledge Simon Birmingham, the Education minister who has been doing an outstanding job and I'll say a little more about that Birmo in a moment. Anne Ruston, Senator Ruston's been looking after agriculture in South Australia and around the country as Assistant Minister. Tony Pasin, doing a great job as Member for Barker and we were in Mount Gambier last night. We had a full dance card, starting off with school captains and ending up as is traditional, with politics in the pub, and that was very well received. It was wonderful to be there Tony; it was great to be there with someone who is such a part of the community. I felt that, at one point I said put hands up whose not related to Tony Pasin and there were at least a dozen people who were prepared to put their hands up but I think everyone felt they were part of the Pasin family last night. And of course Nicolle Flint, the Member for Boothby, we were there at the RSL there at Colonel Light Gardens today, meeting with veterans, with Dan Tehan, the Minister for Veterans Affairs. We've got a very big veterans program in our budget. And again I'll say a little bit more about that, but again it was wonderful there and Nicolle the way you spoke about your connections, your family's connections to the community, to the little school just around the corner, where your grandmother taught and your great grandfather, he came back from the war and settled there in a war service home. Again I really felt I was with family there in Colonel Light Gardens with you today. And of course we also have many of our state colleagues, but above all the only temporarily Leader of the Opposition and soon to be Premier, Steven Marshall, wonderful to be here with you Steven.

I want to acknowledge Steve Murray, the President of the South Australian division of the Liberal Party and Sascha Meldrum the State Director.

Now dear friends with this Budget we are making the right choices for the better times ahead – we are doing so fairly and responsibly, providing more opportunities for Australians to get ahead and realise their dreams.

That is the beating heart of this budget – fairness, opportunity and security

for the nation.

The budget is the latest step in our plan to create more jobs, secure the vital services that Australians rely on and ease the cost of living – all the while, while living within our means.

Now this budget builds on the very significant investments we are already making in South Australia – all designed to grow the local economy and generate new jobs, sustainable jobs.

And there is no clearer example than our commitment to South Australia's defence industry. And as I said a moment ago this morning, with Marise Payne and Christopher Pyne, South Australia has no more passionate advocate than Christopher Pyne, let's face it he is an ardent advocate for this state, and an ardent advocate for Australia's future as an advanced manufacturing nation and there we were with Marise and we launched our Naval Shipbuilding plan.

Now this \$89 billion shipbuilding programme is the largest single investment by the Commonwealth in our history.

It's at the centre of our plan to build a more capable, agile and potent Australian Defence Force. It plays the key role in developing our advanced manufacturing and innovation sectors.

Next year we will begin building the first of our Offshore Patrol Vessels right here in Adelaide, before constructing the nine Future Frigates and the 12 Future Submarines.

Today we announced a \$1 billion investment to build the substantial infrastructure and upgrade the facilities at the Osborne Shipyard, down there are Techport – creating 500 jobs starting this year – and this work will mean we are ready for this ambitious project that will create and sustain thousands of jobs for generations.

Now this investment means that workers who have been employed in the auto industry here who have been doing it tough will have new opportunities to reskill and retrain. It means that South Australian science or engineering students will have the opportunity to find a great job here in Adelaide when they graduate.

The future is not somewhere else. It is right here in South Australia, and this is the key to securing our nation's future, indeed South Australia's future: innovative, technologically advanced, proudly Australian. And where better to do that, than here in South Australia.

It underlines our commitment to keeping Australia safe in challenging times. And we're going to do it while making sure, wherever possible, that every dollar is spent in Australia, every bit of technology, and knowledge and expertise is created here, for the benefit of Australia. Our defence industry plan is about security, national security and economic security. It is avowedly patriotic and nationalistic, it is focused on our national interest and we are determined to ensure that as we secure our safety in the years to come with the right capabilities for the ADF we also make sure that as much

of that industry, as much of that work, as much of that expertise is to be found here in Australia because we know that beyond the expenditure and investment in defence capabilities there are enormous spin offs into the rest of the economy, into the rest of the industry and of course while the Shipbuilding Program is focused here in South Australia, this is a national supply chain exercise. This is a proudly Australia national enterprise that we are embarking on.

Now my government is also taking a very different approach to infrastructure.

Historically the Commonwealth has been a relatively passive provider of grants to state governments – an ATM in fact.

We need to make our infrastructure spending go a lot further, we need to leverage private sector contributions and operate as you'd expect the government I lead will operate, more as an active and an intelligent investor, taking direct equity stakes in projects wherever we can, rather than simply as a dispenser of cash.

So along with our transformational defence industry plan and our Naval Shipbuilding Plan here, the budget provides more than \$3 billion on infrastructure projects for this state, with almost \$1 billion on works over this coming year.

It includes key projects along the North-South Corridor, easing congestion, improving road safety at Oakland Crossing and investing in the Flinders rail link.

And we have provided \$40 million in supplementary road funding to local councils.

Now there is one topic that has come up invariably when I talk to South Australians in recent times and that is energy. South Australians understand perhaps better than anyone else in Australia how important it is to invest in critical infrastructure in the energy sector. The state Labor Government has utterly failed the people of this state. Because of their ideological pursuit of large renewable targets they have ignored the storage, backup and integration of technologies the system's security requires. It has been almost an absence of mind, a mindless pursuit of a large renewable resource in wind, great, great opportunities there I'm not criticising any particular mode of generating electricity, but imagine getting to the point where the state has virtually no baseload power, and where you have a wind resource, a renewable variable source of energy which can from any moment provide a 100 per cent of your electricity or none. Your security being nothing more than a long extension cord to the Latrobe Valley.

Now you all know in this room what the result has been: blackouts, chaos in the energy sector and the highest and least reliable, highest cost and least reliable electricity in Australia.

Now that is not our approach. Our decisions on energy are guided by engineering and by economics, not ideology and politics.

Now our offer to take on more or all of the ownership of Snowy Hydro will ensure Snowy Hydro expands its vital role in the National Electricity Market, by boosting its capacity by 50 per cent and by providing the most substantial increase in energy storage in our history and hence more security for South Australians. It's the only way to make renewables reliable, is to provide that storage.

We're investing in pumped hydro locally as well. Energy Australia have signed with our Australian Renewable Energy Agency, ARENA, to examine a pumped hydro project at Cultana in the Upper Spencer Gulf.

Again designed to deliver the backup, the reliability that renewables need.

And our \$110 million equity funding to build concentrated solar thermal plant with storage in Port Augusta will also support reliable and affordable supply of energy.

Now since the election we have delivered more than \$25 billion of gross savings. However, it is clear as you know, that many of the other savings we have pursued, reductions in spending simply cannot pass the Senate. They couldn't pass the Senate in the last Parliament and we can't get them through the Senate in this Parliament.

We have to work with the parliament the Australian people elected.

The new big bank levy will raise \$1.5 billion a year, it represents a fair and affordable additional contribution from the major banks – which are among the most profitable in the world – towards budget repair.

It reflects the benefit the large banks receive from a well regulated and stable financial system and it has many counterparts in comparable developed economies, including the UK, Germany and France.

Now it gives us no joy to raise additional revenue. We prefer to reduce taxes. But we cannot afford to throw a burden of debt and deficit onto the shoulders of our children and grandchildren.

The fundamental responsibility my Government has – and any responsible national government has – is to bring the budget back into balance over the cycle, so that we can stop this mountain of debt, this mountain of deficit and debt, that will in due course result in future generations either paying much higher taxes or having much less services. Or in all likelihood both.

The banks will make all sorts of claims, but let me be very clear: given the scale of their profitability and the scale of the bank levy, there is absolutely no reason for them to pass on that levy to their customers.

At the same time our comprehensive banking package will deliver reform that enshrines fairness in the financial sector.

We're creating a one-stop shop where consumers and small businesses can resolve their disputes with their banks and other financial institutions.

And we're introducing a new Banking Executive Accountability regime to make sure that senior bank executives' remuneration reinforces their obligation to act in the interests of customers.

So our opponents talk about banks and making sure that banks do the right thing by their customers – we're not inquiring, we're acting. We're delivering on those vital reforms to ensure that Australians are well served by the big financial institutions in whom they place so much trust.

Now, there should also be no doubt that this is the budget that secures the future of Medicare. It should quarantine it from politics once and for all. Medicare has been the subject of political games for too long – all of us remember Labor's notorious scare campaign from last year.

After the election I told Australians that they could trust the Coalition to secure our world class health system and that's exactly what we are doing. So the budget includes record funding for Medicare – the backbone of our health system. And we will establish the Medicare Guarantee Fund, ensuring complete transparency and security of funding into the future. The Medicare Guarantee Fund will safeguard Medicare for the benefit of all Australians, now and forever.

And we are lifting, progressively, the Medicare rebate freeze, first imposed, I should remind you, by the Labor Party

This will increase the rebate for patients and it will safeguard bulk-billing. I should note, the figures out just this week, show that bulk billing has risen further and is now at 85 per cent. Bulk billing in South Australia also remains at record levels.

At the same time, we're spending \$1.2 billion making life-changing medicines cheaper, putting them on the PBS including drugs that target conditions like heart disease, severe asthma and cystic fibrosis. We have listed 1400 new drugs on the PBS. Labor in their time listed 331. They had to ration listing of these life-saving drugs because they lost control of the budget. When drugs are recommended for listing, we list them.

And we're managing the budget to be able to pay for them.

We are also funding the latest in advanced medical research technology with \$68 million towards Australia's first Proton Beam therapy facility at the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute here in Adelaide.

I'd like to acknowledge the advocacy of the South Australian Members and Senators in that regard for making the case.

I'm particularly proud too that this budget includes substantial measures to support our veterans.

As I often say, as Dan Tehan and I and Nicolle Flint were saying today at the Colonel Light Gardens, we best honour the veterans, the diggers of 100 years ago, in these centenary years of the Great War, by supporting the men and women of the ADF, the veterans and their families today.

Our budget contains an extra \$173 million to treat mental illness, with \$58 million earmarked for veterans.

It ensures that anyone who has served full time in the ADF can access free mental health treatment.

Importantly also, our budget delivers certainty on two vital national responsibilities where Labor completely failed Australians.

The first is the National Disability Insurance Scheme. It was established under the Labor Government but with strong bipartisan support from the Coalition. However, it was never fully funded. The Disability Insurance Scheme faces a \$55 billion shortfall in future years. If nothing is done, the system will fail the people who need it the most.

We must not forget the 32,000 South Australians who will be supported by the disability insurance scheme when it's fully rolled out.

So rather than saying to parents with a disabled child in a few years time: "I'm sorry, the cupboard is bare. We don't have the funds to support the NDIS anymore," what we're saying is we're looking all Australians in the eye and saying: "We all benefit from this National Disability Insurance Scheme. We are all covered, so we should all pay for it." I'm pleased to see that our commitment to do that in 2019, has been so well received.

Another area where the Labor Party let down Australians dramatically and shamefully was with school education. Labor failed to deliver on David Gonski's vision for school education. They talked about Gonski but they completely failed to deliver what David Gonski had recommended. They left us with a set of 27 secret deals, conflicting, with anomalous outcomes, lacking in transparency, lacking in equity, totally betraying the commitment that David Gonski, the recommendation that David Gonski made. Indeed, his partner in that report all those years ago, Ken Boston, described what Shorten and Gillard had done, as being a corruption of the Gonski report. So strongly felt, was their rejection of what Labor had done with it.

So, to sort this out, came Simon Birmingham, one of your greatest exports to Canberra, who is ending the funding wars and putting Australian children back at the top of the class.

At the heart of our policy is fairness and equity, needs-based funding. Transparent, consistent national needs-based funding. The extra \$18.6 billion we're committing over the next decade will enable our schools to deliver a world class education. For the first time, we will deliver the true needs-based funding that Gonski recommended six years ago. You can't argue with that. School funding should be distributed according to need. This is a fair system for all Australian children, one that increases funding for more than 99 per cent of schools.

In South Australia, more than 262,000 students in 718 schools have been waiting for a better deal. And we will deliver it. Over the next decade Commonwealth funding in South Australia will increase substantially,

including at the school Mr Shorten was visiting today, by \$3 million over the next decade.

As a father, grandfather, and the father of a school teacher, education is very close to my heart.

My life was changed by great teachers and I want all Australians to have great teachers.

So our Quality Schools program is about that consistent needs-based, transparent funding.

And with Gonski 2.0, a new review headed by David Gonski, we will establish how best to spend this additional funding to ensure better results.

These reforms will give our children the very best shot at life.

The ingenuity, the enterprise of South Australians is demonstrated clearly in the small and medium businesses that are the heartbeat of your economy.

We're backing them, and the 6.7 million Australians they employ nationally.

We are extending the instant asset write-off for another year for businesses with turnover of less than \$10 million. In South Australia alone, more than 180,000 businesses will be able to invest in the capital they need to grow.

Our new Skills Training Fund will make sure Australian workers have the right trades and skills for the future. Skilled migrants will continue to make an important contribution to our economy by filling the gaps that Australians cannot.

We have already, as you know, reduced taxes for more than three million small and medium businesses with turnovers up to \$50 million, enabling them to invest more, employ more and pay higher wages.

And we will go back to the Senate to seek support for the rest of our tax plan. I recently met President Donald Trump, in New York. He's planning to bring down company tax in the United States to 15 per cent. Britain's is heading to 17. The new President of France plans to cut his country's corporate taxes to 25 per cent.

We cannot be competitive if our company tax rate remains at 30 per cent.

Are we seriously going to say, as Labor would have it, that people will want to invest in Australian businesses if they have to pay twice as much tax as they would in the United States or in Europe? The reality is we need a competitive tax rate because that encourages more investment and more employment. So it is Australian workers who are the greatest beneficiaries of our tax plan and that's why we are determined to implement it in full.

But while we believe in lower taxes, paying them is not optional. Because of our tough new anti-avoidance laws – which I should note Labor voted against – multinationals are now paying their fair share of tax in Australia.

Our Government is applying the careful planning and responsible economic management Australia needs to this year's budget.

It is a fair budget. It is a responsible budget. It is a budget for every Australian.

When presented with the choice between a budget that defends our AAA rating and one that puts budget repair in the too hard basket, we made the responsible choice.

Liberals above all, are committed to responsible economic management.

Continued senate opposition has meant that revenue is doing more of the heavy lifting than we would have liked.

But we have to deal with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be, or as we fondly imagine it should be.

Even then, in these challenging circumstances, spending as a share of GDP continues to fall, reaching 25 per cent of GDP by 2019-20, only slightly above its historical average. We will keep real growth in spending at an average of 1.9 per cent over the next four years, a far cry from the 3.5 per cent we inherited from Labor.

And we are bringing the budget back into surplus, \$7.4 billion projected in 2020-21.

This is a building budget: it is building a better Australia, with record investments in road and rail, improved schools funding, guaranteed Medicare and a fully funded disability insurance scheme.

The economy will grow as businesses invest and Australians see the infrastructure that they need, is being built.

There'll be more jobs, and they'll be better paid.

These are the right choices, these are the fair choices, to secure better times with greater security and more opportunity, for all Australians.

Thank you very much.

**[ENDS]**

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**[Spokesperson's statement on allegations of misconduct by a](#)**

## humanitarian partner organisation in Greece, on behalf of Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management Christos Stylianides

The European Commission has in place a thorough mechanism to monitor and ensure that its humanitarian funding worldwide is implemented in full respect of all humanitarian principles and sound financial management.

Through this mechanism we have identified potentially serious allegations related to one of the humanitarian projects being implemented by a partner in Greece.

An allegation relates to a case of potential sexual exploitation of beneficiaries by the partner's staff members. Another allegation concerns potential financial corruption by these staff members.

Although these remain allegations under investigation, the Commission is taking them very seriously. We take a zero tolerance approach to any abuse of the rights and personal integrity of all refugees and migrants as well as to any misuse of funds.

Our primary concern is the welfare of the potential victims. Accordingly, we shall ensure that immediate support is provided to them.

We have already informed the Greek authorities and submitted the case to OLAF, the EU's anti-fraud office for immediate investigation.

Steps are being taken to suspend payments to the partner until the investigation is concluded.

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## High Representative Federica Mogherini announces senior nominations

Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, announced today the nomination of 41 new Heads of EU Delegations<sup>[1]</sup>.

Pierre MAYAUDON has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Afghanistan. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Bangladesh.

Aude MAIO-COLICHE has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Argentina. She is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Venezuela.

Michael PULCH has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Australia. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Singapore.

Rensje TEERINK has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Bangladesh. She is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Nepal.

Oliver NETTE has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Benin. He is currently serving as Head of Unit, Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) in the European Commission.

Hans-Peter SCHADEK has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Cameroon. He is currently serving as the Head of Division for West Africa within the EEAS.

Peteris USTUBS has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Canada. He is currently serving as a member of Cabinet of the High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini.

Sofia MOREIRA DE SOUSA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Cabo Verde. She is currently serving as Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to South Africa.

Samuela ISOPI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Central African Republic. She is currently serving as the Ambassador of Italy to Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad and Equatorial Guinea.

Alberto NAVARRO GONZALEZ has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Cuba. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to the Dominican Republic.

Gianluca GRIPPA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Dominican Republic. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Strategy and Instruments of the European Neighbourhood Policy within the EEAS.

Andres BASSOLS SOLDEVILA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to El Salvador. He is currently serving as Deputy Head of Division for Regional Affairs Americas within the EEAS and as Chair of the Council Working Party on Latin America and the Caribbean (COLAC).

Johan BORGSTAM has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Ethiopia. He is currently serving as Ambassador of Sweden to Kenya.

Julian WILSON has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Pacific Region, based in Fiji. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific within the EEAS.

Alessandro PALMERO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to

Honduras. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Paraguay.

Michael MANN has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Iceland. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Strategic Communications within the EEAS.

Ramon BLECUA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Iraq. He is currently serving as Head of Political Section in the EU Delegation to Yemen.

Emanuele GIAUFRET has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Israel. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Democracy and Electoral Observation within the EEAS.

Boris IAROCHEVITCH has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to the Kyrgyz Republic. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Eastern Partnership, Regional Cooperation and OSCE within the EEAS.

Christian MANAHL has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Lesotho. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Eritrea.

Hélène CAVE has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Liberia. She is currently serving as Advisor to the Managing Director for Africa within the EEAS.

Giacomo DURAZZO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Mauritania. He is currently serving as Advisor for Development Cooperation Coordination within the EEAS.

Klaus RUDISCHHAUSER has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Mexico. He is currently serving as Deputy Director General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) in the European Commission.

Peter MICHALKO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Moldova. He is currently serving as Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the Hellenic Republic.

Claudia WIEDEY has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Morocco. She is currently serving as Head of Division for the Horn of Africa, East Africa and Indian Ocean within the EEAS.

Kristian SCHMIDT has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Myanmar. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Uganda.

Ketil KARLSEN has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Nigeria. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Honduras.

Thierry BECHET has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Norway. He is currently serving as Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to the International Organisations in Vienna and as EU Permanent Representative to the OSCE.

Paolo BERIZZI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Paraguay. He is currently serving as a member of Cabinet of the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica.

Diego MELLADO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Peru. He is currently serving as Head of Division for Selection and Recruitment within the EEAS.

Markus EDERER has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Russia. He is currently serving as State Secretary of the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Nicola BELLOMO has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Rwanda. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Swaziland.

Sem FABRIZI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Serbia. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Australia.

Tom VENS has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Sierra Leone. He is currently serving as Head of Political Section in the EU Delegation to Somalia.

Barbara PLINKERT has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Singapore. She is currently serving as Head of Division for HQ Security and EEAS Security Policy within the EEAS.

Esmeralda HERNANDEZ ARAGONES has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Swaziland. She is currently serving as Desk Officer for Southern Africa within the EEAS and has formerly served as Chargé d'Affaires to the Gambia and to Suriname.

Pirkka TAPIOLA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Thailand. He is currently serving as Head of the EU Delegation to Moldova.

Maria Cristina MARTINS BARREIRA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Togo. She is currently serving as Head of Division for Horizontal Coordination of the EU Military Staff within the EEAS.

Attilio PACIFICI has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Uganda. He is currently serving as Advisor to the Managing Director for Africa within the EEAS.

Karl-Otto KÖNIG has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Uruguay. He is currently serving as Ambassador of Germany to Panama.

Isabel BRILHANTE PEDROSA has been nominated as Head of the EU Delegation to Venezuela. She is currently serving as Ambassador of Portugal to Namibia.

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<sup>[1]</sup> They will be formally appointed after the receipt of the agréments.

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## Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the EU Strategy on Syria during the plenary session of the

*Check against delivery!*

Thank you very much.

I am particularly glad we have the opportunity to share in this hemicycle again the work we are doing on Syria, especially today as the UN has reconvened the talks; the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva just started this morning. I just spoke a couple of hours ago with Staffan de Mistura again, the UN Special Envoy [for Syria] who has concluded this morning the first renewed round of talks with the Syrian parties aiming at entering into the substance of the political transition, including on constitutional set-up. This is the process on which and in which the European Union is investing, supporting the intra-Syrian talks, the UN facilitation and the work of the Syrian opposition, the civil society, especially the women of Syria – work that we support every day with our teams, both in Geneva and in Brussels, but also in the region.

So, the European Union has a special role to play, to help the Syrian people end the war in their country. The European Union is not a military actor in Syria – I know some might argue that this makes us a less powerful player in the region. Even if, as you know well, I always value a lot whenever we manage or we decide to use also our hard power in some situations that require this, I strongly believe that the fact that we are not a military player in the Syrian crisis makes us stronger in the political context of trying to solve the problem and the crisis there.

Because we have not taken part in the devastation of the country, and at the same time we have been on the side of the civilian population, all throughout the war, as the first humanitarian donor for Syrians both within and outside of the country. Exactly for this reason we have a stronger role to play when it comes to the political mediation and solution.

First of all, let me stress one basic thing that sometimes we take for granted, but I think in these times we are living, it is definitely not something that is irrelevant: we are the ones contributing to the humanitarian work inside Syria and around Syria. We are the ones bringing aid through the UN agencies and international organisations; trying to save every single life; trying to bring every single child to school; trying to guarantee the minimum basic living conditions for Syrians.

This is something I will always be proud of. Some might consider that *realpolitik* goes as far as making this irrelevant. Let me tell you the basic condition not only of humanity from my perspective, but also for the political future of Syria, is that there are some Syrians left. I am sorry, this is very hard to say but our work of saving lives on the ground, guaranteeing that people have humanitarian aid, medical assistance, food, water – basic, basic living conditions – is first a humanitarian duty, and second is also a major political asset also to be a recognised, trusted political actor for the parties. It is precious, so much precious that to me it is invaluable.

Because we have not destroyed, because we help people's daily life, we can better help the Syrians rebuild the future of the country. And this is something that not only the international community, not only the region, but also and first of all the Syrians recognise to the European Union. This is the core of the European Union's Strategy on Syria – adopted by the Council on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, with Conclusions endorsing my joint communication with the Commission [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Elements for an EU Strategy for Syria]. This is our answer to anyone who believes – as I was saying – that we are powerless because we are not shooting. It is exactly the contrary. The entire European Union is united behind the goal of a political solution to the war, and the means to achieve it. It demonstrates what we can do in practice to end this war and ensure that lives are protected, rights respected, democratic aspirations and needs are met.

In the Strategy we outlined a clear set of objectives: seeking a political solution to the conflict within the UN framework, supporting the opposition – including the High Negotiation Committee – to develop their proposal for a meaningful and inclusive transition, and in parallel – as I said – working to save lives, to promote human rights, to strengthen civil society, the role of women, to promote accountability for war crimes – extremely important, I will come back to that – and to support the resilience of the Syrian people.

The Strategy indicates the direction of our actions; it is not a philosophical paper; it is a roadmap for acting together. Two days after it was endorsed, we have begun to put it in practice, hosting the major Ministerial conference on Syria in Brussels, together with the Secretary General of the United Nations. We brought together 80 delegations from countries and international organisations from the region and the entire world, raising more than 9 billion euros until 2020, including 5.6 billion euros for 2017 alone. There was a risk of the international community being disrupted; of having a sort of donors' *fatigue* when it comes to the support to Syrians and I was glad to see that we managed to mobilise more resources than last year in London [Supporting Syria and the Region – London 2016]. This is important, it makes a difference to the lives of the people on the ground. But again – as I said – it makes a difference also for the UN and our support to the UN system, another political objective we have very deep in our hearts and minds in this period of time and it strengthens the possibility for a political work to be done in Geneva.

More than two thirds of this amount comes from the European Union and the

Member States. So, once again, we are throwing a lifeline to millions of Syrians, inside the country and in the region, building in this way the basic conditions for the future of Syria, the survival of Syrians.

As you might remember, on the eve of the Brussels Conference, a terrible chemical attack hit Idlib's province and I do not believe this was a complete coincidence. Normally, as the international community gathers to work for peace and show unity, and determination and commitment, the enemies of peace tried to derail its efforts.

But that very same day, from Brussels, from the European Union, from the UN, from so many countries and organisations, we sent two powerful messages. First, we all agreed that those responsible for these crimes must be held accountable. And last week, exactly one week ago, on Europe's Day, the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, in New York, I was briefing the UN Security Council and sharing with them the fact that the European Union fully stands behind the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in its investigations: this is the right forum to document any responsibilities for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The Brussels Conference also made a call for support to the new "International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism," established by the UN General Assembly, which will assist in investigating and prosecuting war crimes cases in Syria. Accountability for us is key.

Second, in Brussels we all committed to work for a political solution agreed among the Syrian parties as the only just but also the only realistic way to end the war.

Accountability and the need to support a political solution and to be serious about that: these were also the main messages we heard from the representatives of the Syrian civil society, Syrian women, during the Brussels Conference. We heard a very powerful word from them: *hudna, hudna, hudna*. They were repeating it to us, and this means "we need a ceasefire". We need violence to decrease and peace to reach some areas of the country. For three days, around the Brussels Conference, over 40 Syrians from all parts of Syria and from the diaspora, representatives of civil society organisations with very different backgrounds, women and men, different ages, worked to agree on a set of common messages for the Conference. Their representatives delivered their messages to the ministers in the political session. We have immediately turned the Strategy's recognition of the civil society's crucial role into practice and I know this Parliament is particularly supportive of that, rightly so. These are the people who can reach across the conflict lines, talk to each other, heal the wounds of over six years of war, to make reconciliation truly possible on the ground, locally. And the expertise they hold will also be essential to post-conflict reconstruction.

In fact, let me say the Syrians who came to Brussels from within and outside of Syria, different parts of the country, agreed very much with our determination to begin preparations for the day after the end of the conflict. Because too many times – too many times – the international community – and also Europe – was not prepared for *winning the peace* after a war had ended. It is a mistake that we cannot afford anymore, Syria and the Syrians cannot afford that mistake. Of course, reconstruction will only begin

when a political transition will be under way, not before. This is in the hands of the Syrian talks in Geneva under the UN auspices that the European Union is accompanying day by day. But the European Union has already started to engage and to contribute to the post-agreement planning in close cooperation with the United Nations and the World Bank. Also because this can be a very powerful tool, maybe one of the most powerful tools today, to support and accompany the political process, showing the peace dividend, being an incentive to the Syrian parties to find and implement an agreement.

The same logic marks our Syria Strategy: we don't try to bet on the future, but to prepare for it and contribute to shaping it, together with the UN, together with the powers of the region, but most of all, with the people of Syria. Because peace can only come from the Syrian people, from a political solution agreed by the Syrian parties.

This is the most complex and the most violent conflict in our times and it is clear to all in the world that no regional or global power alone has the strength to solve it. We need forces to join along one line, which is a political solution agreed by the Syrian parties in Geneva under the UN auspices.

All different initiatives – and we wish that all of them manage to deliver and to be implemented, including the ones taken in Astana – now have the big responsibility to converge towards Geneva, to help the Syrians build peace and find their own path towards national reconciliation. And there are no shortcuts for that. We have seen it for six years: Geneva, the UN process, the multilateral framework, these intra-Syrian talks is and must remain the only way to transition.

As I said today, Staffan de Mistura has resumed the talks with a clear intention of entering into the substance of the transition, starting from the constitutional set-up of the country. The European Union stands there in Geneva, as well as the work we do in Brussels and in the region, to accompany the UN, their work, to accompany the Syrian people for a democratic, united and inclusive Syria to finally bring peace to the country and to our entire region.

Thank you.

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## **Statement by the Spokesperson on the murder of journalists in Mexico**

The continuing wave of targeted assassinations and attacks against

journalists in Mexico raises serious concerns. Yesterday, two journalists, Javier Valdez, laureate of the International Press Freedom Award, and Jonathan Rodríguez Córdova were shot dead while Sonia Córdova was seriously injured. The EU expresses its deepest condolences to the families and colleagues of the victims, and wishes a prompt recovery to Mrs Córdova.

Swift and transparent investigations are needed in order to bring perpetrators of all crimes to justice. In this context we note the request issued after the first crime by Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto for the Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Freedom of Expression (FEADLE) to support local authorities in the investigation.

These incidences of violence – with seven murders of journalists since the beginning of the year and fifteen in 2016 – make Mexico one of the most dangerous countries in the world for media workers. The Mexican authorities are expected to effectively protect journalists, to allow them to work without fear of reprisals and to end impunity in the cases of crimes against journalists and activists.

The EU remains firmly committed to promoting freedom of expression and freedom of press. The existence of free, diverse and independent media is an indispensable precondition for the protection and promotion of democracy.