**Christos Stylianides,** *on behalf of the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy***.** – Madam President, these are really critical moments for Venezuela. The crisis unfortunately is worsening by the day and it risks destabilising the entire region. Millions of people have already left the country and many more are fleeing in these very hours. It is urgent to find a peaceful and democratic way out of the crisis, a solution where the people of Venezuela have the chance to determine their own future. Free and fair elections are the only way out of this crisis.

On 23 January, the people of Venezuela called massively for democracy. Regretfully, these demonstrations have been met with indiscriminate violence from the authorities, leading to numerous deaths and many more injured and arrested.

In these days, the European Union has made its voice constantly heard, with two statements by my dear colleague the High Representative, on behalf of all 28 Member States, and through regular contacts with our Latin American and international partners. We have called for the urgent organisation of free, fair and credible elections to allow the restoration of democratic and constitutional order in the country. By free, fair and credible elections, we mean that all political forces should be able to participate without any obstacles. We mean that a national electoral council should be established with a balanced composition. We mean also that international observers should monitor the whole process – any aspect of this process.

The presidential elections last May were neither free, fair nor credible. As a result, they lacked all democratic legitimacy. The country urgently needs a government that truly represents the will of the Venezuelan people. In the event new presidential elections are not announced, we Europeans will take further action, including on the issue of recognition of the country’s leadership.

The European Union fully supports the National Assembly: right now, it is the only legitimate political body that has been democratically elected by the people of Venezuela. The powers of the National Assembly need to be restored in line with the Constitution of Venezuela. The prerogatives and safety of its members must also be respected, starting with its President, Juan Guaidó. His personal and political freedom must be guaranteed.

The priority now is to prevent a military escalation and to create the conditions for a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis. With this aim, our High Representative is in constant contact with European capitals but also with our international and Latin American partners, as I already said.

Yesterday, the High Representative met with the Foreign Ministers of Bolivia and Ecuador. Since last weekend, she has spoken with UN Secretary‑General António Guterres, and with the Vatican’s Secretary for Relations with States, Paul Gallagher, with Argentinian President Mauricio Macri, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and with the Foreign Ministers of Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, Peru and Norway.

With all of them, she discussed our proposal to create an international contact group. We believe it is important that regional and international actors work together to open up this space for a political process inside Venezuela.

It should be clear to everyone that military intervention would only make things worse. The solution to this crisis must come from the people of Venezuela. At the same time, the conditions are not ripe yet for a dialogue between the different sides inside the country.

So the contact group will not engage in a direct dialogue with the two Venezuelan sides, but we believe that an international initiative can help build the conditions that will eventually lead to relaunching a political process inside Venezuela, and to free and fair elections with all the necessary guarantees. We want to restart meaningful talks at the international level as an intermediate step and a precondition for talks inside Venezuela. The preparations for the contact group are ongoing and the High Representative will discuss this tomorrow with the 28 EU Foreign Ministers at Gymnich.

At the same time, the European Union is maintaining its position as set out in the Council Conclusions of May last year, with restrictive measures on the top brass of the Maduro regime.

Allow me a final word on our humanitarian work, because the situation inside Venezuela, unfortunately, especially in the humanitarian field, is really deteriorating moment by moment, minute by minute. We remain committed to helping those in need in Venezuela and the host communities that have welcomed the many Venezuelans who have fled their country. In December, I remember, in Strasbourg, I announced an additional EUR 20 million in humanitarian assistance only. This brings total EU support for last year only to EUR 55 million for the Venezuelan people both inside Venezuela and in host communities, and sometimes our humanitarian partners provided assistance really behind the scenes, in very dangerous ways.

Federica Mogherini met in December with Eduardo Stein, the Joint Special Envoy of the UN Agencies. We expressed our willingness to work closely with him to address these challenges and we very much support a regional response to the current crisis.

We care about Venezuela and its people. Hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans are also European citizens or have family in Europe. We will do all in our power to prevent the first war in decades in Latin America and to help the people of Venezuela find a way out of this dramatic situation.