AXA 1Q14 conference call transcript

May 6, 2014

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Andrew WALLACE-BARNETT, Head of Investor Relations, AXA

Okay. Good evening to all of you and welcome to the AXA conference call, covering the first quarter 2014 activity indicators. Gérald Harlin, the group CFO will lead you through the main messages included in the press release which was issued by the company just a few minutes ago and which is available on the website. This will be followed by a question-and-answer session. Gérald, the floor is yours.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Thank you, Andrew and good evening to everybody. Before moving to the Q&A, let me give you a quick recap of the main figures for this quarter.

Overall, I would say that the trading conditions were quite positive, with total revenues up 2% on a comparable basis. I would like to remind you of the strong ForEx impact compared to last year, the euro, the euro strengthened and against the yen, the U.S. dollar, and other Asian currencies. It explains, again, the difference between the reported and comparable basis. You will see that the year has started with further improvement in product mix across all segments. We are continuing to be very selective in the business we are writing, in line with our Ambition AXA strategy.

Let's start with Life. From the Life side, the revenues are up 1% to €15.8 billion, APE down 6% to €1.6 billion, mainly due to the product repositioning in Switzerland and some exceptional sales in the first quarter of 2013, principally in Germany and the UK. In the quarter, NBV was up 1% to €0.5 billion and our NBV margin continued to increase, up 3pts to 33%, driven by the improved product mix. One feature of the quarter was a decrease in Protection & Health APE, largely due to the repositioning of our Group Life product mix in Switzerland towards Pure Protection products with lower premium and higher NBV margin. These declines were partly offset by continued increased volumes in France, U.S., MedLA, and high-growth Asia. We remain confident about our overall growth momentum for the year 2014. And we are well-positioned to increase our Life & Savings APE compared to last year.

Let's speak now from the P&C. On the Property & Casualty side, revenues were up 3%, mainly driven by 2% average tariff increases and higher volumes in high-growth markets +10% and Direct +8%. Personal lines grew by 2% and Commercial lines by 4%. We believe that this good momentum should continue through the year and translate into higher growth in 2014 versus last year.

On Asset Management, revenues were up 2%, thanks to both AXA IM and AllianceBernstein. Net flows amounted to €+1.5 billion for the period with €+4.8 billion inflows at AXA IM and €-3.3 billion outflows at AB. AXA IM benefited from strong net inflows in fixed income, while AB had limited outflows driven by the loss of two large contracts in the institutional channel, partly offset by net inflows in the private clients channel.

Note also that our economic solvency ratio continued to improve during the quarter and was estimated to be around 210% as at the end of March.

So, overall, we had a sound quarter with revenues up across all segments, good performance across the board in P&C and a further improved product mix and a higher NBV in Life. We did see a decline in Life APE due to the product repositioning in Switzerland and the non-repeat of exceptional sales in Q1 2013 in Germany and the UK. As I said, we are confident about the growth momentum for 2014 and expect to increase both our Life & Savings APE and P&C growth compared to last year. I'm happy now to answer your questions.

Q&A session

Paul DE'ATH, RBC

Yeah, good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for taking my questions. A couple of questions, please. Firstly, looking at the performance of Tian Ping because I note that this isn't actually included within your numbers due to the change in the accounting methodology and it would be good to get an idea of how that business is operating.

And the second point is just on the U.S. variable annuity buyout. Obviously, you note in the release that a large part of the outflows that you're seeing have come from that buyout. And just a bit of an update, please, on how that's going. Is it now finished? And kind of what level of take-up did you get overall on that project? Thanks.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. The first point about Tian Ping - Tian Ping is not in these figures. It's not consolidated. The second point is about the net inflows. Net inflows amounted to €1.8 billion. But you are right, that means that the buyout of the VA explains minus €0.9 billion, which means that excluding this element, we'd have net inflows of €2.7 billion, which is quite a good number.

Paul DE'ATH, RBC

Okay. Thanks. And just on – and I register that Tian Ping's not included in the numbers, but, if there's any kind of anecdotal comments you can make on how that business is going.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

No, it's going well, in line with our expectation, nothing specific to mention. The growth is quite nice.

Farooq HANIF, Citi

Hi there. So, firstly, you're talking about being confident about APE growth for the full year. Can you explain what's going to get you there, given that you have the FX effects and various others that you've already seen in Q1, so is it because of comparables later in the year or is there something else that you can point to that's concrete? And in particular, I noticed that your new business margin in the U.S. is up quite a lot. That's obviously before interest rate adjustments year-to-date. So, I was wondering whether you're still willing to be more aggressive in growing in the U.S. That's, just growth is one question. And second question, you talk about your mix being better, but Protection & Health has been very weak in APE. So, just kind of wondering where you see that going. Thanks very much.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. Let's be clear. What I said is – clearly, is that our APE are expected to be positive for 2014. That's what I said. You are absolutely right saying that Protection &

Health is at -15% in the first quarter. But, as I said, it's due to one-off elements that are not expected to be recurring during the year. Let's explain why. The first element is due to Switzerland. As you know, we have two type of – you know that, in Switzerland, the most important part of our Life business is Protection, its group Pension. And we have two different type of contracts, full protections. That means that we are covering biometric risk plus investment risk, and semi-autonomous, which means that we're covering exclusively biometric risk. That means death and disability, excluding savings part. What we decided to do, as you know, in Switzerland, we have the SST, which is the Swiss Solvency Test, which is Solvency II, but even tougher. And that means that, in a low interest rate environment, reinvesting, as we did in the past, CHF3 billion to CHF4 billion a year is some – in a low interest rate environment, is something which brings yield dilution, which is not favorable for the policyholders but also for the shareholders. So, what we decided is that, for no change, I would say, on the traditional tied agent side because it's mostly full protection that we sell there. But, on the broker channel where we deal with medium and large companies, which are exposed to, I would say, price competition, there, we decided mostly to move to the semi-autonomous part. Why? Because it saves capital, and the return is better. And that explains why the Switzerland case explains most of the negative performance of the APE. On top of this, we have Germany. And in Germany, in fact, what happens is that we had – remember maybe that, last year, we had a strong production in health due to the non-repeat of – and we had – and we didn't repeat the strong sales of the first quarter. Why? Because there was a change in regulation. And during – up to mid-2014, we had strong sales due to the anticipated switch to unisex tariffs. Last but not least, we had strong one-offs or strong production I would say, new business sales in the UK due to the pension – what we call pension tips. So, these three elements explains most of what I would call, as I would say seasonality effect plus some one-off effect in the first quarter. And that's why we are confident in our ability to post a positive APE growth for 2014.

Farooq HANIF, Citi

And just going back on the U.S. business... Some of your competitors, who are making very strong margins in the U.S., is seeing this as a good time to grow. What's your attitude toward the VA market right now and willing to grow?

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. What I can tell you, Farooq, is that, in the first quarter, Annuity grew by 8%, which is quite strong. And Life was down 19%. And Life is much, much smaller. So, that means that, yes, on the Annuity side, we are growing, and we still expect to grow during the whole year. So that means that we – the U.S. posted a plus 5% growth on an APE basis in – no, it was 4%, sorry. We posted +4% on an APE basis. You'll notice that our NBV margins went up from 24% to 32%, +8pts. And this compares with an average NBV margin for 2013 of 27%. So, you can see that we are growing, point number one. Also, this growth is slowed down because the Life business is not so profitable so we prefer to be down in Life. And the profitability is going up quite strongly. And as you can imagine, last point, most – we had a very strong growth in products like Retirement Cornerstone which are Accumulator type of products, VA type of products, but which are less difficult to hedge because we benefit from – we propose a variable guaranteed interest rate.

Farooq HANIF, Citi

Okay. Thank you very much.

Nick HOLMES, Societe Generale

Hello. Thank you very much. Yeah, I have a couple of questions. The first one is just coming back on the variable annuities. A lot of U.S. players are backing away at the moment and just interested if you could elaborate a little bit more. I know you've given some commentary on this already, on the risk reward profile that you see in this business. Is it, do you think an opportunity to get back into the top five in that type of product, or are you more sort of circumspect about the risk appetite?

And then, secondly, just on France, just looking at Unit-Linked production, you've been making progress there. And I just wondered what scope you see to really improve Unit-Linked production further. Do you think there's a sort of level above which you can't go in France because of cultural sort of preferences, or do you think there's quite a good story for the Unit-Linked possible in France going forward? Thank you.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. Nick, answering the first part of your question related to the U.S. VA sales, of course, we manage a certain level of risk appetite. That means that what we did in the past, and we have been among the first ones to do – to revise the conditions of the products, to update them and so on and so forth. It's not in order now to go back to the top of the league table of the VA sales, not at all. That means that we have strong growth. But as I mentioned before, answering Farooq's question, we take care that we

– our growth is on less risky products. Also, they are extremely profitable. So, we are combining growth, monitored growth with high profitability. But, our intention is not to be back, as you said, in the first five, for example. And nevertheless, we still are quite ambitious in our global growth of the U.S.

About France, as you know, we are at a level of Unit-Linked which amounts to 30% of our savings, which is a good level, not very far from twice the average level for France. Last year, we were much lower. So, that proves that we have gradually an improvement. Do we see a limit to this? I would say that depends also on the financial markets. But, globally speaking, we are encouraging – including with our commissioning, we are encouraging our sales force to sell more Unit-Linked because the profitability is much higher.

Nick HOLMES, Societe Generale

And, Gérald, just on that point, is it still correct that profitability for Unit-Linked is about three times higher than for traditional?

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

No, because we improved the profitability of the traditional. I would say that it's – today, it's – we could say that it's between 1 to 1.5 and 1 to 2, something around this because we significantly improved because you know that – keep in mind that, in a country like France, we kept our expenses flat during the last years, which means that, gradually, when you have growth, we benefit from a unit costs which are going down. And even for the general accounts, this makes – this is quite helpful. And it enhances our profitability.

Nick HOLMES, Societe Generale

Okay. Very good. Thank you very much.

Blair STEWART, Bank of America Merrill Lynch

Thank you. Good evening. A couple of small questions from me. Can you talk about the Unit-Linked net flows? I think there was a €2 billion swing from one year to the next. Now, obviously, half of that is the U.S. Can you just talk about what the other half is? Does it relate back to these exceptional items you talked about?

The second question is Japan, quite a lot of volatility in the volumes there. Is the €82 million you've printed for Q1 2014, is that a good run rate for the business going forwards now?

My third question is, just looking at the Mediterranean region, volumes up, but margins quite heavily down. And I just wonder what's going on there if you can comment on that, please.

And the final question is in the P&C business, I see that price increases are starting to come down from the level we saw last year. I just wonder what impact, if any, that's going to have on your growth strategy in P&C. Thank you.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. Let's start with Japan. And I'll cover all your questions. Let's start with Japan. Your question is - are you satisfied with this level? You know, the decline in Japan is mostly explained by the lower sales following the redesign of our – some of our protection product, which is long-term Life products. And it was in April 2013, so we had strong sales in the first quarter of 2013, so the reference is pretty high. Does it mean that we are – that we expect during the whole year to be at a level which is so much down because, as you know, we had APE, as you said, at €82 million, minus 15% compared to last year. The answer is no. And we consider that this LTTP high sales volume in the first quarter of last year means that, there again, we have a seasonality effect that should disappear during the year.

On the MedLA region, which was your third question. On MedLA, yes, you are right. You said – your remark was to say that we had APE growth which was quite strong, but NBV margin which was down. Just look at the relative level of sales that means that we are still at high level of profitability and that's mostly due to the fact that it's due to the business mix. That means that, at the scale of MedLA, last year, we had a level which was low. And the business mix meant that we moved down from, on average, 32% NBV margin to 28%, but no worry on that side. We still are focusing like in other countries on Protection and Unit-Linked.

The P&C pricing increase, yes, indeed, we can say that the price increase was 3% last year. It went down to 2.2% in the first quarter. But I would say that it's – I would say that the P&C outlook is quite good. As you remember last year, we were at zero in the mature countries. We are at plus 1%. And we consider that price increases at 2.2% is an absolutely good level. So, we're quite positive, as I said, on the P&C. And we don't consider this lower price increase as poor news.

What was your first question? Yes, it's mostly the UK. So, that means your question was about the net inflows in Unit-Linked. It was the U.S. and the UK.

Blair STEWART, Bank of America Merrill Lynch

Okay. Can I come back on a couple of those, please, Gérald? So Japan, I wasn't implying that you'd be down 15% for the full year. I'm just wondering, is the €82 million, is that a good run rate in absolute terms going forward? There doesn't look to be a huge amount of seasonality in Japan, looking over the years. There's some, but not huge amounts. Just wonder – that was my question more on Japan.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Yeah, but you – I believe I answered your question. But sorry for that. No, that means that we – I cannot consider that it's a good run rate. And you can see on – I believe that in the appendix, you can see that it's in currency. Yes, you can see in the appendix the run rate and you have the – that's the revenue. So, it's not the APE. But we could offline give you a bit more detail about this. But the run rate – I hope that the run rate will be higher, yes.

Blair STEWART, Bank of America Merrill Lynch

Okay. Thank you. And on the MedLA – sorry – I just didn't quite get what's actually changed in the year. You've had volumes up, margins down. I don't think there's – unless I'm wrong, there's not been any change in the product strategy over that time, has there? I would've thought that, just naturally, with volumes going up, your margins should be going up, assuming the product mix is staying the same.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

We had a relative higher share of G/A Savings, mostly in Italy and in Portugal. That's the reason why. So, we had G/A Savings which was extremely low in the past. Why? Due to the economic situation, especially in Italy. So, on a relative basis, no specific change. What I meant in my answer was that there was no specific change in our philosophy and in our approach. But, on a relative basis, there is a bit more G/A Savings.

Blair STEWART, Bank of America Merrill Lynch

Okay. Thank you, Gérald. And finally, sorry, just on P&C pricing, is the 2.2%, is that enough to cover or to offset claims inflation at the moment?

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Yes.

François BOISSIN, Exane BNP Paribas

Yes, good afternoon. A question on the outlook for Life margins, please. You reported 33% NBV margin in Q1, which is healthy. I just wondered what the outlook was for this number for the remaining of the year 2014. Basically, what is the, I mean, in what – in which geographies do you expect to potentially raise this number and in which business lines?

And I guess the other question is, to what extent are you worried by the current interest rate environment? And how could current interest rates impact this number?

And as a follow up, I would like to know if you release an internal rate of return for Q1. Thank you.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

No, we don't. And first of all, we don't release any internal rate of return. We do it once a year.

The second point is, at the NBV margin, my comment was more to say that the – I was expecting the top line to grow. NBV margin is at 33%. Last year, we had 35%. So, it's already an excellent level. What I'm expecting and that's the message I wanted to convey is the fact that we were not expecting to be on an APE basis at minus 6% for the year, but that will be positive. And your question was, where do we expect growth?

We expect growth in the U.S., we mentioned already. So, we started the year at 4%, but we can expect to be higher for the whole year. South-East Asia, China, the UK as well, in France, we should be positive, and Japan. Japan, as I explained, answering a previous question, we started at minus 15%, which is quite low and we expect to be positive this year in Japan. So, that's mostly it. On the reverse, I could say that the situation I described for Switzerland, since as you know, most of the significant part of the new business is sold in the first quarter. We'd still be significantly negative in Switzerland for the reason I explained before, i.e. the fact that we move for some part of the contract to semiautonomous products. And also, in Germany, but we can expect that, progressively, it will – the effect of this first quarter and the high sales in Health in the first quarter due to change of the regulation will go fading. So, that's mostly it.

François BOISSIN, Exane BNP Paribas

Okay. And on the current interest rate environment and the potential impact on margins?

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

I don't – you know, what I said is that, of course, we don't publish margin. But, in the first quarter, we don't publish our earnings. But what I can say that we are still managing a long duration. It's more than seven years in Life. We didn't change. So that means that we're quite well. We don't have any mismatch between assets and liability, which means concretely that I don't expect that this might have a small effect, but I repeat a small effect. I'm not expecting a large effect coming from this low interest rate environment, at least for this year. We'll see after.

Farooq HANIF, Citi

Hi there. Thanks for taking the follow-up. Sorry to prolong this. But just wanted to know, firstly, going back again to the growth question, so you think APE will be up, and presumably in local currency terms. Is that going to come from Protection & Health? Obviously, you've given some regions, but what about products?

And secondly, can you tell us what your early thoughts are on the EIOPA stress test? Thanks.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. Two different questions. On the first one about – my comment on the global APE is valid for Protection & Health. That means that we expect Protection & Health APE to be positive this year. On the second question, it's on the stress test. I have no specific worry for the stress test of the EIOPA. So it's part of the exercise. We did it last year, so, no worry.

Farooq HANIF, Citi

Okay. Thank you very much.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Again, as you noticed, we have a strong solvency position, so no specific worry.

Farooq HANIF, Citi

Except that, though, when you look at the test, it looks fairly harsh and, if I may say so, not very well thought out. But you obviously seem comfortable, so that's fine.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Yeah. No, we still have a discussion on the test, on the curve, on the yield curves. We have some open questions. But, again, I don't have any specific worry.

Andrew CREAN, Autonomous

Good evening, Gérald. Couple of questions. One, if you look back over the last seven years, on the Life net flows, over half the net flows in the year appear in the first quarter, which suggests there's a level of seasonality there. Is that – do you see that as likely to recur this year or do you think that there are special factors this year which may change that pattern?

And secondly, going back onto the EIOPA stress test, the more you've looked at your own economic capital which sort of QIS5 basis relative to the Omnibus II stuff which was put out at the back end of last year, do you think there will be – if you were to do your economic capital on the current long-term guarantees, do you think it would change the numbers and the coverage significantly?

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. And your first question related to the net flows. I would say that, if I exclude the U.S. impact and the €0.9 billion I mentioned before, we would be at €2.7 billion. Last year, we posted €1.1 billion, and excluding the exceptional last year, we were at €4 billion – slightly above €4 billion. I can expect this year to be better than last year in term of net inflows, but it's a bit premature to tell you exactly where we will be. But, on your second question, which is a question on QIS...

Andrew CREAN, Autonomous

Yes.

Andrew WALLACE-BARNETT, Head of Investor Relations, AXA

Could you repeat your question, Andrew, perhaps?

Andrew CREAN, Autonomous

Yeah. The economic capital coverage ratio which you publish is – doesn't bake in some of the Omnibus II sort of long-term guarantee issues. What I was wondering – I know Allianz have spoken on this at length. What would happen to your economic capital coverage if you were to sort of bake in all the sort of new elements?

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

Okay. I see your question, which is an important one. But I remind you that I cannot precisely answer your question yet. I know that Alliance mentioned 20 to 30. And I'm sure that you're referring to this.

Andrew CREAN, Autonomous

Yeah.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

A 20 to 30 points impact. As I said in one-on-ones to some of you, my initial feeling was that it was high. But I cannot be more precise. As you know, we will review our models with – ACPR will review our models in – by the end of the year. And we'll get a full clarity, I would say, next year, most probably mid of next year. So, I have no – I'm not at all anxious starting from a position of 210. No doubt that there will be some adjustment and adjustment which concerns all the companies. And you can see that, starting from a comfortable point, that level, that 210, is that I'm quite comfortable for the future. On the magnitude of these adjustments, unfortunately, it's too early.

Daniel BISCHOF, Helvea

Yes, good evening. Just on the Group Life business in Switzerland again, I'm a bit surprised about the timing of your to reposition your product offering there. I mean, AXA Winterthur was growing the BVG business strongly in 2013 when interest rates were quite a bit lower. And since then, the SST has rather been relaxing for pricing. And so, why did you plan the repositioning right now? And did the proposed pension reforms or did minimum guarantees play a role there as well?

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

I would say that, as you know, our profitability is quite good. I'll remind you that we have, on average, an IRR in Switzerland which should be around 13%. For a country where rates are below 1%, it's quite good. That's on average. But, as you can imagine, the marginal impact, and we take care of the marginal impact of the new production. And what we said is that we have two type of business, as I said. We have the business with the tied agents; we have the business with the brokers. And the margin on profitability of business with brokers is lower. And that explains why we prefer to optimize our capital. Such type of decision is absolutely in line with; I would say Ambition AXA and what we call selectivity. That means that – and more and more going forward, we will have to take care of capital and marginal return on capital. And that's the reason why we decided this year to do it. It doesn't mean that it's impressive because you have a decline in the APE ratio. But, you know – keep in mind that the semi-autonomous type of business makes that the NBV will be above 100%. NBV margin will be above 100%. So, this explains why. And beyond Switzerland, we could expect in the future to be faced in the Solvency II world, with such type of move, which will be aim – which will aim at optimizing the return on capital. And from time-to-time, it's at the expense of the top-line. But, what is important in the bottom line and the return on capital.

Daniel BISCHOF, Helvea

It's just I assume that the returns were probably quite a bit low last year. And you took this decision early this year.

Gérald HARLIN, Group CFO, AXA

No, no, it's only because, progressively, you know – look, I mentioned that, among the reasons that I mentioned just before, we have also the fact that, progressively, we have to invest at lower interest rates. So, that's mainly the point. And keep in mind as well that some part of this business of the investment part will be done with AXA IM. And on top of this, we will benefit from this new improved business at AXA IM.