European External Action Service (EEAS)

Syria: Press remarks by HR/VP Josep Borrell at Brussels VI Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region

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It has been eleven years – eleven years from the [beginning of the] Syrian crisis. It is such a long-lasting crisis with unspeakable suffering of millions of people.

Currently, the world is witnessing other conflicts, especially the one caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine - being the last one - but we are not forgetting the Syrian people and the situation in Syria.

Even after eleven years of bloody and destructive conflict in Syria, we want and we need to make sure that this situation remains high on the international agenda and in our activity. That is why we have called this pledging Conference once again in Brussels.

Certainly, Syria and the suffering of its people might not be in center of the news anymore. There is a certain fatigue after eleven years - but it remains on our minds. 90% of the Syrians living in Syria live in poverty. 90%, it means almost everybody, minus [Bashar al-] Assad and their clique, but the Syrian people, 90% live in poverty. 60% suffer from food insecurity and often do not know what they are going to eat, where is the next meal coming from.

Millions are still displaced inside the country. Millions are living as refugees in the neighbouring countries and even beyond. That is why we have organised, this year, this sixth Brussels Conference on [supporting] the future of Syria and the region, to show that we care, we care for the Syrian people, and to bring the international community together to jointly look for ways on how to tackle their needs.

This Conference is attended by Foreign Ministers and representatives of 55 countries and 22 international organisations, including the UN, in addition to the European Union institutions and the European Union Member States. All of us are coming together in support of Syrians and countries hosting Syrian refugees.

As the main pledging event of the year, the Conference mobilises financial support for Syrians in Syria, and for refugees and host communities in the region. And I am happy to announce that this year, the European Commission is pledging over €3 billion. This builds on

the pledge made at last year's Conference of €560 million for this year and adding an extra one billion to it. And we are pledging the same total amount – €1.56 billion – for 2023.

Together with the additional bilateral pledges from the EU Member States, this is the European Union's contribution. And the total pledge generated from all the participants of the Conference will be announced in the closing session. I hope that we will be able - at least - to match the pledges made last year, because the needs have not been decreasing since last year.

This funding will cover the needs of the refugees, within and outside Syria, and support the [neighbouring countries in the] region that so generously hosted them for more than a decade now. For more than ten years, the neighbouring countries have been hosting these refugees. And it will also support early recovery and resilience – helping Syrians to rebuild their lives.

Allow me to say that this does not mean that we would be funding reconstruction. We will not do that until a genuine and comprehensive political transition in Syria will be underway.

The participants of the Conference have reaffirmed the continuing commitment of the international community to an overall and comprehensive political solution to the conflict in Syria, in line with UN Security Council resolution [2254]. And we support the efforts of the United Nation Special Envoy for Syria, Mr [Geir] Pedersen, to generate momentum for the political process through the "steps-for-steps" process that he has been putting in place.

Participants also have been recalling that now it is not time to normalise relations with the Syrian regime. It is not the time to normalise relations with the Syrian regime, for which it would have to fundamentally change course and engage meaningfully in a genuine political process – which is not the case at the time being. Normalisation as such will not bring any concessions from the regime. On the contrary, it is likely to comfort the regime in in its situation that their behaviour is now accepted. In the interest of the Syrian people, pressure must be maintained on the Syrian regime to engage in the United Nations-sponsored political process.

Participants in the Conference also recognised the legitimate aspiration of the Syrian people for justice and accountability for the terrible crimes that have been committed against them in the course of the conflict.

You know that today's meeting was preceded – as always – by the Day of Dialogue to make sure Syrians have a voice and that this voice is being listened [to]. The Day of Dialogue allowed for the broader participation of civil society actors from Syria and the region. Participants exchanged views, ideas and projects for a future Syria.

It is obvious that Syrians want to create the conditions for a durable peace in Syria themselves. They should be the actors in building of a new Syria. They want the chance to live their lives, independently of and despite the Assad regime. They want to regain control of

their future - no longer depending on emergency handouts. It is very much understandable but for the time being, we have to continue supporting them.

And I want to make a call for the international community to think meaningfully about how to help the Syrians themselves to build peace and ensure the development of their country.

To conclude, I can say after this meeting this morning that the entire international community remains convinced that a comprehensive political solution, brokered through the United Nations, is the ultimate imperative. And I can say on behalf of the European Union that until this prospect is fulfilled, the Syrian people will not be forgotten by us, whatever other events require our attention.

Q&A

Q. What is your response to the criticism that, by not inviting Russia and by having the Summit in the absence of Russia, what have you effectively done is made it more difficult to cooperate on practical humanitarian issues in the next few months?

Yes, certainly, Russia has not been invited. And Russia has not been invited because we are inviting those partners who have a genuine, a real interest to contribute to peace in the world. And Russia, with its aggression against Ukraine, has shown that clearly that it has not such interest, to maintain peace in the world. And the European Union, along with many other partners, will continue sending a clear message of rejection of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in all international fora.

This has not been a problem although the United Nations has chosen not to co-host this Conference, in light of our decision not to invite Russia, but the UN has actively participated and is represented at a very high level, like for example the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, and the [UN] Special Envoy [Geir] Pedersen. So, the work of the Conference has not been made more difficult and the relation with the United Nations has been positive in spite of this non-invitation to Russia.

Q. You have just mentioned that we should not expect any normalisation of EU ties with Bashar al-Assad at the moment. Under what kind of circumstances, should we expect normalisation of the ties? Secondly, on Russia, despite the robust packages of sanctions, Moscow continues the onslaught and keeps trying to divide the European Union. How is the EU going to respond to Moscow?

[On the 6th package of sanctions] We continue discussing, at the level of the Permanent Representatives of the Member States, in order to get an agreement, that could be adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council – which is the body that has a decision capacity on sanctions. We continue working on that, there are still some difficulties pending. I hope that before the next meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council – which is going to take place next Monday –

these difficulties will be raised. And otherwise, we will have to raise the level of discussions to the level of [Foreign] Ministers at the Foreign Affairs Council.

And I explained that [there will be] no normalisation without a change of the behaviour by the Assad regime. Clearly, we are not going to fund the reconstruction, we are not going to normalise our relations with the Assad regime, as long as there is not a deep change in their attitude towards the Syrian people and they do not allow, and they do not participate in good faith in the political transformation of the country.

And that is something not related with the Syria pledging Conference, as the discussions on the sanctions [against Russia].

There is something new that you mentioned, and I want to use this opportunity to explain that today - apart from the discussions on sanctions against Russia, it is a different issue – we have agreed, the Member States have agreed and we have issued a collective statement, condemning the cyber-attacks that have been taking place since the beginning of the year against the Ukrainian government.

And the important thing is that, for the first time at the European level, we are attributing this attack to a state actor, to the Russian Federation. In the past, we had been saying that there were attacks coming from Russia, but one thing is to come from the Russian territory and another thing is clearly attributed to the Russian Federation's government. One hour before Russia launched its aggression against Ukraine, on 24th of February, the Russian Federation carried a cyberattack against the KA-SAT satellite. This caused significant communication outage and disruptions across several public authorities, enterprises and users in Ukraine, and affecting also some of our Member States and international partners. Certainly, this cyberattack facilitated the Russian military aggression.

And this cyberattack proves the multiples layers of aggression and hybrid warfare that Russia is leading against Ukraine. Disinformation is one other part of this multiple layer attack. And now, once we have attributed to the Russian Federation government - I want to stress this - then we have to work together with Ukraine and our international partners on how to prevent, to discourage, to deter and respond to these cyberattacks that we, certainly, attribute to the Russian Federation.

Q. You are saying no normalisation, no reconstruction funding for Damascus. But do you see any discussion at all about more engagement with the government in Damascus from European governments or from the Institutions? We have obviously seen in the last year a new engagement with Damascus from some governments in the Middle East. Is there any discussion from about whether it is a danger that Europe misses a moment to engage directly to sort of push leverage?

We take this attitude because we believe it is the right one - both from a political approach and from getting the best out of our resources and preventing these resources from coming

to support the Assad regime. If you go and spend money reconstructing Syria, it is going to support the Syrian regime. We want to support the Syrian people.

But we need to have the guarantees that we can do that in order to support not just their well-being, but their freedom. What is at stake is the political development of the future of Syria, and I think that we are doing the right thing to do.

Q. High Representative, you mentioned that without Russia, this conference can be good. But if you look at the political situation in Syria, without Russia as a Permanent member of the [UN]Security Council, there will be any solution. Do you believe that you will get access for the humanitarian aid and political solution without Russia here in Brussels, and to have a direct dialogue on Syria with Russia?

Certainly, there is only one passage from the Turkish territories to the Syrian territory in the Idlib area, to bring support to the more than one million people caught there. This support continues flowing, it continues flowing because there is still one passage open. To keep this passage open, we depend on a resolution of the UN Security Council - and certainly, Russia could obstruct it, using its veto capacity. But, I strongly believe that Russia will not do it because it will put more than 1 million people in a very dire situation. So, I think that Russia will not do it. They should not do it.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-224866

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