

Syrian crisis: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference of the Brussels IV Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region

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I just chaired the opening session of the fourth Brussels Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region, alongside United Nations Under-Secretary-General, Mark Lowcock, and United Nations Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen.

Representatives from 80 countries and international organisations as well as international and Syrian civil society [organisations] have connected through video conference. [It is] an awful conflict, a big humanitarian catastrophe that is lasting for almost 10 years. It has left half a million lives lost, almost six million Syrian refugees outside the country, more than six million internally displaced and millions of lives affected, destroyed, deprived of normality. The only normal that a whole generation of Syrian boys and girls know is war.

Behind these numbers are real people. This Conference shows that we are not forgetting the ongoing conflict. We are not forgetting the suffering of the Syrian people and we are mobilising international support behind United Nations Security Council Resolution [2254], the United Nations-led political process to settle the Syrian conflict.

We reaffirm that the only way towards a lasting peace is through United Nations-led intra Syrian negotiations in Geneva, not by military operations.

We urge all parties to fully cooperate with United Nations Special Envoy [Geir] Pedersen so that the third meeting of the Constitutional Committee gets underway without further delay.

The regime needs to understand that it has to genuinely engage in political negotiations. Only after it changes its behaviour, stops the repression against its own people and engages in the political process, we can start talking about normalisation.

In the meantime, the humanitarian needs remain huge in Syria and around. That is why we are raising pledges to meet these needs. We have to start by saying how much we appreciate the ongoing solidarity of countries hosting Syrian refugees: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. They need and deserve the support of the European Union, and they will continue to receive it. Today, the European Union institutions are pledging a total of €2.3 billion, for this and next year.

This morning there was broad consensus on the importance of unhindered humanitarian access, and in this context around the need for the full renewal of the cross-border resolution in the United Nations.

Let me be very clear about another issue: there is temptation to blame the dire state of the Syrian economy and the hardships of ordinary Syrian people on sanctions. I can talk about European Union sanctions and stress firmly that they do not target the civilian population. There are no sanctions on humanitarian aid or on medical supplies. Our sanctions are targeting those oppressing the Syrian people, bombing health facilities and schools, and using chemical weapons.

It is important that civil society representatives from Syria were present during the Conference and in the past few days. They impressed us with their fresh ideas and their desire for a political solution and an end to the war. They hold the key to a peaceful future for this war-torn country.

The Brussels Conference, all in all, keeps the Syrian conflict at the top of the international agenda. There has been a high level of participation and it is a clear proof that we have forgotten neither Syria nor its people nor the neighbours.

We will continue responding to the persisting enormous humanitarian needs and, at the same time, calling for a political solution. It is time to unlock the Geneva talks, it is time to forge a political solution and bring an inclusive peace to Syria.

Thank you for your attention.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-192721>

Q&A

Q. I have a question about the participation from the North East of Syria. They have refugees there, they are suffering from COVID-19 and there is also a financial crisis. Why is there no representatives from the civil society from North East Syria at the past conferences and also at the fourth one? Was there any objections or rejections from any country?

No, there has not been any kind of ban or exclusion of anyone.

I have been talking with participants of civil society from Syria. Yesterday I spent the whole afternoon talking with a diverse group of representatives of the civil society and today there have been several interventions. I do not see any kind of exclusion. I do not know how it was last year, but North East or South East, there is no exclusion for geographical, ethnical, linguistic or any kind of reason.

Q. On the role of Turkey in the North of Syria, and now in Libya. What is the EU's position on the role of Turkey in the region? Is it a stabilising force or is it actually a threat?

[Today] we talked about Syrian issues; we talked about the Syrian refugees. The role of Turkey in helping the refugees is very positive. 3.5 million people staying on the Turkish territory for several years is certainly a big burden and Turkey has shown strong solidarity in taking care of these people and we, the European Union, try to help financially.

Last week [Members of the European] Parliament approved more than €500 million for the Syrian refugees in Turkey. It is not going to be money for the Turkish government but to help Syrian refugees in Turkey. And from this point of view Turkey has played, in this long period of war, an important role and I thank Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt for their efforts.

If you talk about other issues that were not on the agenda today, I know that we have difficulties and problems with Turkey about drillings but this was not the issue today.

Q. La crise de la Syrie a été une des dernières gravissimes crises qui a divisé l'Union européenne. Maintenant qu'on parle de droits fondamentaux quand on pense au prochain plan de récupération et aux prochaines perspectives financières, est-ce que vous aimeriez que la question de l'asile soit remise sur la table pour pouvoir exercer ces droits dans des consulats qui sont à l'extérieur de l'Union ? ¿He visto esta mañana su tweet sobre Venezuela, me gustaría mucho saber si su propuesta es la expulsión del embajador venezolano como respuesta a la expulsión de la embajadora europea?

Sur la première question, elle n'était pas non plus à l'agenda de cette conférence aujourd'hui. Aujourd'hui nous avons concentré nos efforts sur une question pressante, importante, qui concerne la situation de millions de personnes. Je voudrais me focaliser sur ceci mais je ne peux évidemment pas éviter de vous répondre sur le Venezuela car sinon vous allez penser que je n'ai pas de réponse.

The European Union and its Member States are considering appropriate measures in response to the current developments. We believe that the decision to give 72 hours to an ambassador of the European Union in Caracas to leave the country will require the necessary measures of reciprocity but I cannot define which [measures] it is going to be.

We will summon the ambassador of Nicolas Maduro to the European Union institutions today, and let us see after this meeting. At this moment, all options are on the table but some decisions belong to the Council, not to the High Representative, and others belong to the Belgian government and not to the European Union institutions, but we have rules in diplomacy and we will follow them.

In any case, we are convinced that any measure that hampers the diplomatic work only contributes to escalate the tensions and undermining a peaceful and political way out of the crisis. I think that it further isolates the Maduro regime internationally. It is not a good way of trying to solve the political problems in Venezuela and that is why we regret strongly this measure.

Q. Do you see a real risk of Syria becoming a frozen conflict?

If the issue was not so serious and dramatic I would say that I prefer frozen conflicts to burning ones. At least when they are frozen people are not being killed. But if you mean chronic conflict, we cannot afford the chronification of the conflict.

6 million people have left Syria, they have settled in in the neighbouring countries and 6 million more are internally displaced. It is difficult to imagine that the international community, the Syrian society and the equilibrium of the region can afford 12 million people out of their houses forever, hosted in the neighbouring countries and living on the international humanitarian help mobilised through [consecutive] pledging conferences.

We need a political process to go back to a stable, peaceful and democratic Syria. This Conference was also about this - it was not just a pledging conference on the narrow sense of collecting money, but also [a conference] to support the ongoing political process.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-192723>

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