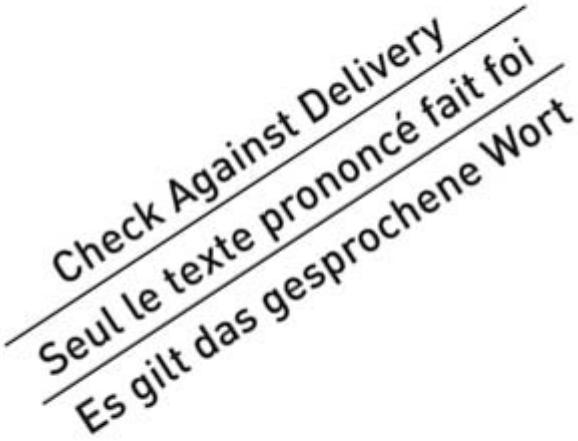
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Catherine Ashton
EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission

Remarks by EU Commissioner Štefan Füle on behalf of HRVP Catherine Ashton on the situation of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries



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Spokespersons' Service
Service des Porte-parole

SPEECH/13/442

President, Honourable Members,

This is a crisis that has brought unspeakable suffering to the people of Syria and that has already gone beyond Syria's borders, dramatically destabilising the whole region.

The European Union has consistently supported the vision of a political settlement outlined in the Geneva Communiqué. High Representative/Vice President Ashton has officially expressed her full support for the joint call made by United States Secretary of State, John Kerry, and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to convene an international peace conference on Syria as soon as possible as a follow up to the Geneva Conference of June 2012. Keeping the political track alive is paramount for the European Union. Next week's Foreign Affairs Council discussion will take stock of where we stand, while also tackling the politically sensitive issue of adaptation of the European Union sanctions regime.

The European Union should continue its engagement with the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) whilst remaining open to cooperation with other moderate groups.

The European Union urges all parties to the conflict to fully respect international humanitarian and human rights law and condemns terrorist attacks of any nature, including any assaults that may endanger the civilian population.

The number of people in need of assistance in Syria (4.25 million internally displaced people) and the number of refugees (1.5 million) arriving in the neighbouring countries continues to grow at an exponential pace. The UNHCR estimates that by the end of 2013 the number of Syrian refugees will have reached 3.5 million, with 1 million refugees each in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey and a further 500,000 in Iraq. Were this to be the case, this would mean that by the end of this year Syrian refugees would account for 25% of the Lebanese and 16% of the Jordanian population.

The sharp increase in refugees has increased the humanitarian needs at an alarming rate, outpacing current relief efforts and assistance. The economic costs of hosting Syrian refugees were estimated in 2013 at $ 700 million for Lebanon and $ 851 million for Jordan, respectively 1.6% and 2.9% of GDP of countries already heavily indebted.

The cost to Turkey so far has been about €600 million and is foreseen to reach €1 billion by the end of the year.

To respond to this challenge, the United Nations are expected to issue a revised appeal of at least $ 3 billion in June 2013, their largest appeal ever for a single crisis.

To address these exploding needs, the European Union has repeatedly increased its funding to become the first donor with €860 million of assistance pledged of which most has been already disbursed.

Standing tall, the European Union has repeatedly called on all donors to deliver on existing pledges and to increase their contributions.

We are improving coordination among donors and welcome the Assistance Coordination Unit's efforts on using all channels to provide assistance everywhere in Syria. We will work to strengthen this Syrian-led effort and will work tirelessly to improve access for our aid.

We are also working intensively to mobilise significant additional funds this year with a view to addressing the plight of the refugees and stabilising Syria’s neighbouring countries.

This will require a long term commitment and a regional approach. To better coordinate our efforts, the Commission, the European External Action Service together with Member States are working on a comprehensive response to the crisis, which will also include dealing with threats stemming from the potential use of chemical weapons, the presence of European fighters in the country and the provision of international protection to Syrians in the European Union.

President, Honourable Members,

While any action seems inadequate given the scale of the Syrian tragedy, we have mobilised an unprecedented amount of effort to assist Syrians in need and their neighbours. We have a record in delivering on our promises, we have a record in delivering on the ground but we need to do more and the letter from some of you last week was very clear in this respect. International NGOs / UN partners are doing very good work but are completely overwhelmed given that the pace of arrival of refugees is constantly growing. As Commissioner Georgieva rightly said on her recent visit to Lebanon and Jordan, this is the most serious and complex humanitarian crisis of the past decades.

In this context, we will have to tackle more decisively issues of prioritisation, coordination and effectiveness. We have to move to a longer term approach, not only providing shelter, but investing in infrastructures and services for refugees such as health and education. I am talking about us looking differently at the EU assistance - we used to address the countries, for the first time we are addressing the region.

Yet we have to be aware that the better must not become the enemy of the good, and we have to progressively enhance our efforts. An increasing volume of assistance, quick mobilisation of funds, effective access, and coordination, coupled with appropriate political response are our signposts. We will continue as long as needed and work hand in hand with our partners in the international community to make good on our promise of assistance and a lasting political settlement of this terrible conflict.