European External Action Service (EEAS)

EP Plenary: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the situation in Lebanon

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Speech delivered by Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarčič, on behalf of HR/VP Josep Borrell

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President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

Today's debate is a timely opportunity to discuss the situation of Lebanon, particularly in view of tomorrow's important vote by the Lebanese Parliament to elect a President which is its 12th attempt.

Also, this debate comes right before the opening of the 7th Brussels Conference on international assistance to the Syrian people and the future of Syria [VII Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region].

Lebanon remains an essential partner, not only in its own right but also for broader regional stability.

This is why we have been strongly engaged on Lebanon since the beginning of the crisis, in late 2019.

We deployed an Election Observation Mission (EU EOM Lebanon) during the May 2022 elections, headed by the honorable member of this house, Mr Hölvényi [György].

We developed a people-centered bilateral cooperation focusing on the most vulnerable. We have maintained our assistance to Syrian refugees and to the Lebanese hosting communities alike.

We have increased our humanitarian assistance. I personally visited Lebanon in March and announced a new package worth €60 million in humanitarian aid.

The European Union has also consistently raised the issue of accountability at the UN Human Rights Council after the tragic Beirut harbour explosion in of 2020, and we have mitigated the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine through enhanced food security and resilience support.

But, we are very disappointed and concerned, at the lack of developments on the Lebanese side. Lebanon's democratic institutions are grinding to a halt one after the other. First, the government, which is in a caretaker capacity since May 2022. Then, the President, whose seat is vacant since the end of October. And now, even at the municipal level. The May local elections have been postponed again and no new date has been set.

All this institutional erosion is unfolding against the background of a collapsing economy, a plummeting currency and a derelict banking sector. And yet, there is no real sense of urgency among the Lebanese ruling elite. A staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is now more than a year old, and there is are no signs of its endorsement by political leaders.

In this context, the European Union should remain engaged in the Lebanese crisis and ready to use all instruments at its disposal. Member States will review the EU Framework of restrictive measures on Lebanon at the end of July, and all options are on the table.

We have addressed Lebanon at the October, November and, most recently, at the April Foreign Affairs Councils to stress the urgency of breaking the double gridlock – both institutional and economic. Lebanon cannot afford to compound economic meltdown with institutional vacuum.

The enactment of long-overdue economic and governance reforms under a fully-fledged IMF programme remains the top priority. It is a prerequisite for any possible macro-financial support not only from the European Union, but also from many other like-minded partners.

Consequently, swift presidential elections, government formation, and municipal elections are more essential than ever.

The situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is also of great concern. The European Union recognises Lebanon's generosity and remains committed to helping Lebanon in hosting refugees.

It is important to underline, that our assistance actually benefits both the refugees and the Lebanese host communities, to an equal extent. For example, when we fund a medical centre for refugees, it will also serve the host communities.

To this aim, the 7th Brussels Conference on "Supporting the future of Syria and the region" is meeting tomorrow to mobilise further international support. Last year's Conference raised a total amount of €6.4 billion. We hope we can secure even more international funding this year.

Finally, the return of the refugees needs to be handled in a cooperative spirit, without being politicised and in line with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) requirements, notably the principles of non-refoulement and voluntariness.

I thank you for your attention and I am looking forward to the debate.

Link to the video (starting from 00:37): https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-242377

Closing remarks

Mr President, Honourable Members,

I think that this debate today testifies to our continued joint engagement on the situation in Lebanon.

Let me comment on some of the key issues that have been raised by you.

On the investigation into the Beirut port explosion, we believe that the investigation that has been initiated by the authorities in Lebanon should be impartial, should be credible, should be transparent, as well as independent. And yes, we are aware of the political stumbling blocks that are delaying this investigation. We have repeatedly called for a swift resolution, and we will continue to do so, including at the Human Rights Council Session.

On corruption in Lebanon: yes, this is a serious issue, as pointed out by many of you. And, as it was stated in the December 2020 Council Conclusions, our cooperation policy with Lebanon is already contingent on the implementation of the necessary reforms, including in the area of fighting corruption.

Any additional EU cooperation, such as, for instance, macro-financial assistance, depends on prior conclusion of the IMF Agreement.

Some of our cooperation continues, of course, but that cooperation is people-centered. It focuses on social sectors like health or education, and it targets the most vulnerable parts of the population, and as such, of course, it cannot be curtailed or conditioned further.

Moreover, this existing and ongoing cooperation is channeled outside administrative structures, mainly through the UN agencies, World Bank and international and local non-governmental organisations. Of course, we closely monitor the use of these funds.

On Syrian refugees, and their possible return: we - I repeat - fully recognise Lebanon’s efforts as a host country, and we have been providing sustained cooperation to mitigate this burden. And we are mobilising again - the international community this year, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow at the 7th Brussels Conference on international assistance to Syrian people and host communities [VII Brussels Conference on ‘Supporting the future of Syria and the region']. I repeat: our support benefits not just Syrian refugees, but also host communities [such as those in] Lebanon.

And of course, the European Union agrees that, ultimately, refugees should go back to their country whenever conditions allow for their safe and voluntary return. This should be done

according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) criteria and - I repeat – on a voluntary basis.

However – and this is a very important point that I want to make again - the presence of refugees should not be blamed for all the economic woes Lebanon is suffering. The current Lebanon crisis stems mainly from self-inflicted economic and financial mismanagement.

On possible targeted individual sanctions, the existing EU framework of restrictive measures on Lebanon allows for this possibility. And as I stated in my introduction, the situation will be reviewed shortly - before the end of July - within the European Union Council, in the light of the latest developments. I repeat that all options are on the table, especially in case of further deterioration of the situation.

As for the specific case of the governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon, Mr [Riad] Salameh, I wish to note that international arrest warrants have already been issued by two Member States of the European Union.

To conclude, let me emphasise once again that the European Union will continue to follow the crisis in Lebanon very closely. All instruments at our disposal are being considered, but we need Lebanese leaders to do their share – and to do it urgently. More than ever, it is time for the Lebanese leadership to deliver, for the sake of their own population.

Thank you.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-242379

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ep-plenary-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-situation-lebanon_en