European External Action Service (EEAS)

Syria: Press remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at Brussels VII Conference on Syria

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You know that the Syrian conflict is with us for more than 12 years. It is a long-lasting crisis with unspeakable suffering of millions of people. And this has been [made] even worse. First, by the dramatic and damaging earthquake in February, and secondly, because the global situation is worsening, not only because of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but also for the new conflicts erupting – the latest one is in Sudan.

But here we are, again, in Brussels, for the seventh year, discussing the needs and pledging further support to the Syrian people.

We are the biggest donor for the Syrian people. The European Union needs and wants to make sure that their situation remains high on the international agenda.

And I am very happy to see that today, at this annual Conference, we have been gathering Ministers and representatives from 57 countries and over 30 international organisations, including the United Nations. And I thank [UN] Secretary-General [António] Guterres for the words that [he] addressed to the Conference.

As I said, the European Union, we are the biggest donor for the Syrian people. And this Conference shows that even in the 13th year of conflict, we continue standing with the Syrian people, whatever else is going [on] in our neighbourhood – be it on the east or on the south.

I can confirm a pledge of humanitarian and resilience funding to the Syrian people for this year amounting to €1.56 billion.

The pledging still continues, and the total amount will be announced in the afternoon by Commissioner [for Crisis Management, Janez] Lenarčič, for this year and for next year.

The pledges cover the humanitarian needs of Syrians inside Syria, and also support for early recovery and resilience, helping Syrians to rebuild their country and covering the needs of almost 6 million – 5.7 million - Syrian refugees in the hosting countries, in the neighbourhood. I am talking about Lebanon - for sure -, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, and also the needs of the communities who so generously provide them shelter.

The Conference is not only about pledging financial resources. The Conference is also about the ongoing commitment of the international community to an overall and comprehensive political solution to the conflict in Syria.

That is why the Conference restated its insistence on the full implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 2254.

Allow me to say that the European policy on Syria has not changed. We will not re-establish full diplomatic relations with the Assad regime, or start working on reconstruction, until a genuine and comprehensive political transition is firmly under way – which is not the case. And we will do it in accordance with the United Nations [Security Council] resolution.

As long as there is no progress – and for the time being there is no progress – we will maintain the sanctions regime. Sanctions that target the regime and its supporters, and not the Syrian people. Our sanctions do not target the population of Syria, nor the health care or the food sectors.

The dire living situation and conditions in Syria are not a result of our sanctions, they are the result of the conflict and the way how the Assad regime governs the country – with repression and corruption.

At that moment when we are pledging resources to support the Syrian people, we do not forget the awful atrocities that the Syrian people have been enduring. And we have to remain committed to justice and accountability for the crimes committed during more than a decade of conflict.

Also, to remember that yesterday, we celebrated the Day of the Dialogue, which is also an integral part of our Conference.

In this Conference, participants [from] across Syria and beyond exchanged views, ideas and plans for a future Syria.

I would like to highlight a remark made by a participant.

He said: “The European Union, the international community, must find ways of empowering Syrian civilians with the means to rebuild their country.”

Syrians want a chance to live their lives independently of - and despite - the Assad regime.

They no longer want to depend on emergency handouts. They want to regain control of their future.

Today’s Conference reaffirms the conviction of the international community that a comprehensive political solution, brokered through the United Nations and enjoying the full support of all its members, remains the ultimate imperative. The Syrian people must get a chance to live in dignity and peace.

That is what the European Union is working for, standing with the Syrian people until that prospect – however distant it may sometimes appear – will be fulfilled.

I want to thank all the participants to this pledging Conference for gathering here in Brussels again.

Q&A

Q. [In Arabic – English interpretation] Today, the Jordanian Foreign Minister [Ayman Safadi] expressed his deep concern. He sounded the bell about the reduction of aid to Jordan which is the country that hosts the largest number of refugees. What is your position on this? How did you respond to this warning he issued?

That is why the Conference is gathering here: to ask for resources. We understand the difficult situation of Jordan that hosts the biggest number of refugees per capita around the world. And we know that 200,000 girls and boys have been born, increasing the population of Jordan, since the start of the crisis. We know that they are asking for services – school, health, refugees camps, many of them inside the civil society of Jordan. We know the dire situation that Jordan economy is facing, and this Conference wants to bring an answer to that. The pledging of this Conference will alleviate the situation in Jordan. The message of the Jordan [Foreign] Minister was very moving, and I am sure that this will increase the support of the Conference's attendance in order to alleviate the situation in Jordan. I understand that, if the international organisations reduce the support to Jordan and to Jordan's refugees, someone else has to take this place. This someone else is the international community gathered here. I hope that, when today, the results of the pledging will be announced, we will find a concrete answer to this question.

Q. Syrian and international human rights organisations have been raising concerns on the serious violations of the human rights of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, albeit by Lebanese state institutions, including the military. Yesterday, Syrian civil society stressed the importance of conditional support to host countries. Mr Borrell, I would like to know: how is the European Union going to approach conditionality in order to guarantee that the rights of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and other host countries are not violated?

The only way is [through] dialogue with the Lebanese authorities. We know about some of these events that you are mentioning. We cannot accept that the refugees could be forced to go back to Syria without the conditions for a safe and dignified return being fulfilled. These kinds of policies of sending these people to Syria by force has been proven [to be] completely ineffective, because people come back. You send them back by the door and they come back by the window. So, this is not the answer to the situation. But at the same time, I understand that Lebanon requires more support because if you compare the living standards of the population and the refugees, both are bad. In order for the civil population to understand that they have to continue hosting these refugees, they need stronger support from the international community. Once again, this is the purpose of this Conference.

Q. I was just curious about something you said this morning. You said: “The EU will not waver from its approach towards Damascus, it won’t re-engage.” Yet, you remain ready to explore with your partners every possible manner of bringing the Syrian regime to engage in a political solution to the conflict in Syria. Can you tell us more about how you are exploring this? What does this consist of?

How do we do that? By doing. We do that by doing. We have not changed our political approach. We are not on the same line as the Arab League, that is clear. And I express clearly the position of the European Union that we keep the same position with respect to the Syrian regime. But it does not mean that we will not explore any possibility for improving the situation in Syria – supporting the United Nations Special Envoy [Geir Pedersen] and, certainly, trying to work together with the Arab League and combining the pressure that we can do put from our position, and the outreach that the Arab League can do from their new position. I think that this opens a possibility for exploring. As the Arab League believes that this new policy can bring some results, we will support them but keeping our position.

Q. [In Arabic – English interpretation] Yesterday, during the Day of Dialogue, there were people who drowned. More than 700 people drowned, only 100 survived. Many of them were Syrian youth, many of them from Dar’a, which is no longer under the control of the Syrian regime. Those young people fled from the region because they have no future there and they wanted to reach the shores of Europe for a better future. There are reports that show that there is corruption and theft in the humanitarian aid that reaches the areas controlled by the regime. So, are there any guarantees for the part of the humanitarian aid that goes to areas controlled by the regime? What are the guarantees, or is there any guarantee that the regime will not use this to support its military machine that kills people?

You know that you will never have a complete guarantee. You will never be sure that the corruption phenomenon cannot divert [part of] the funding from the destination, but we have to face this risk. We cannot stop our support because there is ‘a risk of it’. Risk will never disappear, especially under the political circumstances of Syria. So, we cannot say that [there is] 100% certainty. We have to deal with this [risk], it happens everywhere. There is interference, there is corruption phenomena, but we rely on United Nations’ agencies, and we rely on the agencies that manage the fundings that we are allocating to them [to always adhere to humanitarian principles and principled operational guidelines]. What we can do is keep vigilant in order to avoid any kind of sequestration of these funds for illegitimate purposes.

Q. You have been in Iraq, in Kurdistan. Do you have any plan to go back there? And do you have any message for the Iraqi authorities or the Kurdish authorities? Because, you know, over the past several years, there are always tensions between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan regional government. So, do you have any message for them today? And also, today the Iraqi Foreign Minister [Fuad Hussein] is here.

Yes, I had a bilateral meeting with the Iraqi Minister [for Foreign Affairs], as [with] many others - Jordan, Lebanon. I will have bilaterals with as many ministers and representatives as possible. Certainly, I had the opportunity to praise the Iraqi government for the good cooperation with the European Union in some fields, in particular in the field of migration. I had to praise the Iraqi government for the regional role that they are playing, trying to balance the multiple tensions in the region. They have been playing an important role on the normalisation of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Today, the Iraqi government is a factor of stability. The Minister [for Foreign Affairs] invited me to the Baghdad Conference that will take place in November, so I hope I will have the occasion to go back to Iraq, and maybe also to Kurdistan, I was very well received. And my message can only be a message of cooperation and mutual understanding between the different institutions of the country.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-242313

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/syria-press-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-brussels-vii-conference-syria_en