“Ceasefire in Lebanon – prospects for the future” – speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the Representation of Land North-Rhine Westphalia

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When you, when all of us, received the invitation to this event last week, I think only very few of us expected that the situation in the Middle East, in Syria, would develop so dramatically within the space of just a few days.

I would therefore like – although this evening is supposed to be primarily about Lebanon – to focus on Syria.

Also because we all know how closely the dynamics in the countries of the Middle East are bound up with one another. We haven’t begun to sense this only in recent days, but we have known this for months, if not for years or decades.

And I know, Suzan Mouzi Yassine, how much the situation in Syria is preoccupying the people in your country, in Lebanon. More than one million Syrian people have found refuge from the horrors of the Assad regime and the brutality of the civil war in your country over the past 14 years. Why they had to flee is becoming clear to us once again in a most appalling way at the moment. In light of the terrible pictures from the Saydnaya prison, for example. People locked up alone in the dark, left to die, countless murdered relatives, those who didn’t know for decades whether their children, parents or friends were still alive, and among them people from Lebanon.

We see so many people in Syria breathing a sigh of relief, finally feeling the light of freedom again. They have hope for a better future in freedom and in peace. But, and it’s important to me to emphasise this, it’s a future that is still uncharted. The people in Syria, and also in Lebanon and in neighbouring countries, have witnessed all too often how dreams are shattered. I therefore believe that not only is this evening important, but that it’s important that the focus that’s now placed on the hopes of the people is maintained, that it also keeps on reminding us that we mustn’t give up, especially at times when there is no hope. This, too, has left a strong impression on me over the last year.

Time and again, I have been asked: “Why are you going there again? You’ve hardly achieved anything so far.” But that’s precisely the goal of those who seek to dash hopes time and again – that you give up, that you bury your head in the sand and then don’t even do the smallest

thing you could in the most hopeless of situations, that you don’t save a single human life when you’re unable to save hundreds of thousands. Meanwhile – and we have also seen this in Syria – others step into the breach, namely those who are bent on hatred and violence. It’s therefore a particular pleasure and honour for me today, this evening, not only to be able to speak about Lebanon, but also to pay tribute to the humanitarian aid organisations that are working in the Middle East with such dedication. And not just when there’s hope, but especially when there’s no hope for many and our attention here in Europe is not focused on the situation. Malteser International, Caritas, Help, the Diakonie and many other organisations have all helped to ensure that hope isn’t abandoned even in the darkest hour. What makes your work so special is that you focus on people, on their most urgent needs, and you do so impartially, especially when the political circumstances are difficult, especially when the suffering is greatest. When it comes to providing women, men and children with the essentials, with medication, food and tents. Because, for them, humanity is what matters.

And yes, foreign policy is primarily the purview of the Federal Government. But what characterises our country, the Federal Republic of Germany, is that this isn’t the whole story. With this event, you, Mr Liminski, are also making it clear that our country is characterised by people getting involved at all levels. In

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such as North Rhine-Westphalia, in countless towns and communities – by collecting donations for aid organisations or by supporting projects themselves. And that, too, unfortunately, and this has to be said, cannot be taken for granted. Niels Annen and I know that, over the last year, time and again, people, especially at the federal level, have, almost in passing, said things like: “Humanitarian assistance and development assistance are just a lot of blah-blah.” But without this aid, there might not have been any hope in recent years that things could change one day. That’s why I wanted to take this opportunity today to, first and foremost, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your work.

This work not only assists people on the ground, but it also supports what we as the Federal Government can then take forward in political processes. Whether we’re talking about acute emergency aid in Syria or in Lebanon, sending rapid assistance to earthquake victims in Turkey or supporting micro-entrepreneurs in Lebanon after the explosion in the port of Beirut, there are so many initiatives that we’re building on today. Even if our political focus is on humanity in Syria right now. Because that’s precisely what this is about today. Instilling hope for the future. Hope that peace is possible also for Syria. It’s clear that a new chapter is now being written there, one that’s being written by the Syrians themselves. But – as I have said in recent days – what this new chapter will look like is a completely open question. The situation is currently anything but stable. Fighting and violence are continuing. So-called IS has not yet been completely defeated. In other parts of the country, tens of thousands of people, predominantly Kurds, Alevites and Yazidis, have been displaced. The people have

not yet achieved the transition to a free Syria. As the international community, we must now do everything in our power to ensure that Syria finds a pathway to a peaceful future in which all people, regardless of their religious or ethnic background, can live together in security. What is required for a peaceful handover of power is a Syrian-led dialogue process. However, a civilian government accepted by all sides will only be achieved if all minorities and political groups are able to sit at the table and make their voices heard. And – let me make this very clear – above all, women. We know from other peace processes around the world that if women are not at the table, the risk that a peace process will not last is much, much greater.

And, at the same time, we must not allow this process to be undermined from the outside. I would like to make that very clear. If we want a peaceful Syria, then the territorial integrity of the country must not be called into question. The

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must support this process and adapt the existing peace process to the new circumstances. And we, as the Federal Republic of Germany, should, can and will lend our active support to this process. Precisely because we have stood by the side of the people of Syria for decades and have established intensive contacts behind the scenes with Syrian stakeholders from all areas of society and ethnic and religious processes. And, yes, this is also important to me because we didn't give in to those voices that said just a few weeks ago that it was necessary to normalise relations with Assad – Assad the mass murderer. Strong diplomacy, strong foreign policy, also means that, when it comes down to it, we endure situations for years in which we can do little or barely anything – and then we don't just cave in. Because that would have meant that we would have given up on the millions of Syrians, some of whom were locked up in these torture chambers.

And so I would like to thank all constructive actors here in our country, at so many different levels, for the fact that we have always found this strength together and that we have stood by the people instead. And that we found ways to do something nonetheless, because saying that we cannot side with the dictator doesn't mean that we had no options. On the contrary, we decided to ramp up our assistance.

And that's precisely what we need to build on now – including with your work. The situation was already dramatic in a number of regions. Not everywhere in the country, that has to be said. But now it's becoming almost impossible for some to cope: food prices have skyrocketed – the cost of bread alone rose by 900 percent over the weekend. That's why we've now granted an additional eight million euro in humanitarian assistance. We know that when the need is so great, political processes are practically impossible. Humanitarian assistance and development cooperation are therefore also the prerequisite for not only being able to start reconstruction at some point, but also for being able to tackle the political process now, which will be more than difficult. There are many areas in which Germany can

play an active role alongside the political sphere, for example in dealing with Syrian chemical weapons or in addressing the atrocities committed by Assad and his regime. By promoting justice. This is also one of the foundations of peace at the end of the day: without justice there can be no reconciliation, and without reconciliation there can be no lasting peace.

And we can only achieve this together with our most important European partners. Shortly before coming here, I met them to discuss peace in Ukraine; the Ukrainian Foreign Minister was also in attendance. But Syria, Lebanon and the Middle East were also major topics of discussion, of course, because the world's crises are so closely interlinked. We cannot claim that peace in the Middle East has nothing to do with our peace. Russia's role in Syria, in particular, was a decisive factor behind the Assad regime's ability to cling to power for so long. And that's why international coordination is so essential, both for you as aid organisations in the international context and for us in the field of diplomacy. And that's why it's also so essential that we do not blindly take action for action's sake in this situation, but that we coordinate closely with our international partners instead. With this in mind, I'd also like to make it clear that I find it somewhat bewildering that some of the same people who, just a few weeks ago, were calling for normalisation with the mass murderer Assad, now, just a few days – or rather, 48 hours – after the fall of the regime, already know exactly what Syria's future will look like and that everyone could, of course, go back to the country immediately.

It's precisely this actionism, which, when it comes down to it, prioritises one's own national interests over what's important on the ground, which poses a threat to a Syrian-led process that we can now move forward with. That's why we need a coordinated approach with expertise, pragmatism and a great sense of responsibility in a wide range of areas. I made this clear yesterday with our eight points, all of which are interrelated. The coordination of cooperation on refugees, for instance, which also concerns returns from other countries – for example Lebanon, which is home to around one million people from Syria. Three million Syrians are in Turkey. We cannot consider this in isolation from the discussion here in Europe, just as international cooperation and reconstruction cannot be pursued in isolation. And that's precisely why I will be travelling to the region again next week to discuss this with our closest partners.

What the people in Syria long for is the same as what we hope for in Lebanon. And that's the heading of today's event, that hope doesn't become a dream that's shattered, but that a new chapter in history can be opened. We have witnessed what it means to have a ceasefire in Lebanon, so that people have been able to breathe a sigh of relief for a few days rather than just 72 hours. After weeks and months of fear and violence, after Hezbollah had sucked the people of Lebanon into its war against Israel – and only one day after the brutal attack on Israel by Hamas on 7 October last year.

According to Lebanese officials, more than 4000 people have been killed in Lebanon in recent months. Over 1.4 million women, men and children have been driven from their homes in the south of the country. Meanwhile, some 65,000 people have been displaced from northern Israel. And I've met a few of them on both sides: displaced people from southern Lebanon and displaced people from northern Israel. And everywhere, people felt the same thing: this is about people, about mothers and fathers. This is about children. Their concerns were exactly the same. They're asking themselves: what will happen to my children's school? In northern Israel, when your own child hasn't been able to go to school for a year because you can no longer live in your own home? And I heard the same question on the streets of Beirut when I was there. Our own local employees at our embassy in the region, people who said that they had already moved three times. Who said: every time I go to the embassy here, I don't know if I'll see my child again in the evening. We must always keep this in mind and not be unnerved. There's no competition of pain between people, but the vast majority of people have the same goal – simply living in peace and security.

And that's exactly what I sensed – whether in Israel or in Lebanon, I was struck by how much solidarity there is between people. Particularly in Lebanon, between the different, also ethnic and religious, groups. When I was there a few weeks ago with Paul Ziemiak, we were at the Red Cross, where we met volunteers. Young women, 18, 19 years old. I asked them: "And where are you from?" And most of them said: "I come from southern Lebanon. I'm here in Beirut now and can no longer go about my normal life. That's why I volunteered for the Red Cross here to help out." Very different ethnic groups, all of whom wanted but one thing: to help together. And this strength, if I may say so here, is what makes this country so precious in my view: that in the greatest emergency, it becomes clear time and again how strong this shared future could actually be. The Red Cross has shown that this is possible. And it has also shown the strength of the people of Lebanon, where state structures have completely broken down in some areas and the International Red Cross, together with the Lebanese Red Cross, has taken responsibility for the emergency water supply in the region entirely on its own, because the state has no longer been able to do so for years.

That's why this moment is so powerful for me in view of the ceasefire, because it shows what's possible if we do not allow outside forces to destroy all of this again. The ceasefire is therefore not only a diplomatic success, which we owe to the tireless mediation of our US and French friends in particular, a feat of our coordinated shuttle diplomacy, but it is also a success for the people on the ground. It shows what can be achieved through diplomatic means. And we now need these diplomatic means just as much for the ceasefire in Gaza, so that the German and the other hostages there will be released at long last. And so that the suffering and hunger of hundreds of thousands of women, children and men in Gaza can finally come to an end. Because this ceasefire is also important for the ceasefire in Lebanon and because the people in Gaza also deserve a life in dignity. Just like the families I met during my many visits to Israel, who, after more than a year, still don't know what has

happened to their daughters, their sons, their mothers, who are in the hands of Hamas. All these people have the right to look forward to a better future again.

But it also has to be said that, despite all our efforts, we haven't got there yet. We must now do everything in our power to turn these hopes into reality. That's why it's so important for us, speaking again in my capacity as Germany's Foreign Minister, that we not only appreciate the strength of the population, the humanitarian aspect, but that we also make our political contribution, including with our soldiers in the UNIFIL mission. The new ceasefire monitoring mechanism under US oversight is supported by UNIFIL, as well as by the Lebanese army, whose task now is to assume full control of the region south of the Litani River and to ensure that the situation along the border is stabilised. And we, as the Federal Government, are supporting them in this and have therefore once again stepped up our support for the Lebanese army, to an estimated 43 million euro since the beginning of this year. We're also providing support by increasing our humanitarian assistance on the ground as well as our development cooperation, so that you can continue to do everything you're already doing in Lebanon: mobile clinics run by Malteser International, urgently needed relief supplies provided by Help, and also by supporting education. I'd like to make that clear at this juncture. I think all of us who have children still remember exactly what it means when schools are closed for a few days. Even in a country where everything works, where there's peace and where you have everything, the pandemic can push you to the brink of a nervous breakdown if you're unable to send your children to daycare or school for weeks or months. And the fact that this situation arises time and again in Lebanon in emergency situations is something we take for granted, that schools in Lebanon are closed until the end of the year. And that's why our development support, what the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development is doing in various places in the region, also through

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, is so vital, too, in the school sector, and I'd like to make that very clear here.

Together, we can help to ensure that the challenges of the future can be tackled. This also means that we keep on addressing the destructive role played by other actors. Iran has not only contributed to Assad's long-term survival in Syria. Iran has also supported militias in Iraq, Yemen and, of course, Lebanon that aren't interested in what we're discussing here today, namely the protection of humanity. And that's why, in addition to everything we're focusing on here today, in addition to development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, the establishment of a stable Lebanese state is such an important task for us. So that an offer can finally be made in Lebanon, by the state, and not by a terrorist organisation stepping into the breach. To make better offers for everything you need to live, for all the people of Lebanon.

And that’s why it’s so important for the election of the new President to take place in Lebanon on 9 January. So that a legitimate government can be re-established that will then finally implement the necessary economic reforms to enable Lebanon to stand on its own two feet again. We know how important this process is. We’re thinking about this together with our Arab partners in the region, with regional actors, and with Lebanon’s international partners. You can continue to rely on this. You can rely on the aid organisations staying put for as long as they are needed. You can rely on us as the Federal Government staying put, even though we will be holding elections in a few weeks’ time. Because we have made it clear here that the democratic parties in this country, whether at the federal or

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level, follow precisely this line of being there for others when they’re in need. And, above all, we have staying power when it comes to reconstruction, and don’t measure this by legislative terms.

After all, we know from our own history that this is about the people, about their dignity. It’s about the people of the entire Middle East region who want to be able to breathe freely again at long last. And not just for a short time and not just today, but in the long term, to live without fear or worry. Just like us – in peace and security.

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