European External Action Service (EEAS)

Brussels VI Conference on supporting the Future of Syria and the region: Opening remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Ministerial session

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Check against delivery!

Ministers, colleagues, dear participants,

I am honoured to host you, this time in person, for this sixth Brussels conference on [supporting] the Future of Syria and the Region. I am pleased to see many friends from the region and from different corners of the world, and also from the UN family, which have come in strength.

This year's conference takes place against the sobering backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Through its invasion, Russia has violated international law and the rules-based order, particularly the UN Charter. This does not just concern Europeans, nor is it about "the West vs Russia". This brutal war is a violation of core international norms that concern the North, the South, the East and the West. We are working with all international partners to bring an end to the war and exercise solidarity to address the many global consequences of Russia's aggression.

While war rages in Ukraine, the conflict in Syria is entering its twelfth year.

We must make sure that we do not forget the Syrian people and to continue pushing for a peaceful Syria. And I thank you for reinforcing this message with your presence here today.

Today, our first and essential task is to ensure that pledges of humanitarian assistance remain at least at the level of last year. You know that the needs remain enormous. Even if Syria is not anymore on the front pages, in the headlines of the media around the world, even if we talk less about Syria, we are very much aware that 90% of Syrians living in Syria live in poverty. 90% means everybody, everybody in Syria, even the people belonging to the regime live in poverty. 60% suffer from food insecurity and barely know where their next meal is going to come from. And the Russian war will increase food and energy prices, and the situation in Syria will become worse.

Yes, we cannot forget the needs of the Syrian refugees living in neighbouring states - I mention Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. Nor we can forget the needs of the hosting communities. These states continue to provide generously for nearly 7 million Syrian refugees – from Ukraine, 5 million, from Syria, 7 million. And I would like to acknowledge the sustained generosity demonstrated by their governments to their refugee populations, even when needs rise and tensions mount.

We know this is a heavy burden. And we also hope – like everybody here – that conditions will soon be in place for voluntary, safe, sustainable and dignified returns to Syria. This is what the Syrian refugees want - and what we also want and we are working for. We hope – at least, let us keep the hope – that the displaced people will be able to go back on a voluntary, safe, sustainable and dignified return to Syria.

Last year, the European Commission pledged €560 million for 2022 to help meet the needs from the Syria conflict. And in order to start the pledging Conference - which I am not only chairing but [I am] also representing what the European Union can do -, I am pleased to announce today an additional €1 billion pledge for the calendar year 2022. And this will make our contribution – cumulated - more than €1.5 billion.

For 2023, the European Union will provide the same financial support - €1.56 billion. This funding will be for the benefit of Syrians in Syria, for the benefit of refugees and their host communities in the region. I have to ask all of you to be equally generous today. Our strong political commitment to Syria must be backed by equally strong financial commitments.

Dear ministers, dear colleagues, you all know that the annual Brussels Conferences have been a beacon of hope for the Syrian people. You must help to keep that hope alive – even when, unhappily, there appears to be none.

The Syrian people do not want to remain dependent on emergency handouts. They want our support to rebuild their lives, their communities, their economy. We must work more with Syrian civil society, with local organisations, with local leaders, to make sure that our assistance corresponds to what is needed and has the biggest impact. Syrians living in Syria are trying to rebuild their lives and communities along renewed, democratic and peaceful lines.

Yesterday, we hosted a Day of Dialogue to listen to how Syrian civil society envisages a future Syria of human rights, of peace and democracy. We will hear from them in a moment. I think it is an important part of this Conference to hear from them. We must support and encourage them, with a special attention to the role of Syrian women. They have suffered the most and deserve not only special attention but also a seat at the table.

We must also maintain our commitment to justice and accountability for the crimes committed – do not forget, so many and how awful crimes have been committed during more than a decade of conflict. I am pleased that the Head of the dedicated mechanism - the “Triple I M”

[The International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism] - is with us today and will present her work, which is already bearing fruit. And we should do more to uncover the truth about the missing persons - those who have been detained in secret for far too long, causing much suffering to so many. And we look forward to the proposals the High Commissioner Bachelet will present soon.

Finally, a particular priority are the millions in Syria whose survival depends on continued cross-border assistance from Turkey. The European Union will work with Turkey and others on the renewal of the vital cross-border resolution ensuring the delivery of humanitarian assistance into North-West Syria.

Ministers, colleagues, I know there is a certain fatigue. How not, after eleven years of conflict. How not? And the world's public opinion seems not to be able to deal with more than one crisis at a time. Now, there is Ukraine on the headlines, but do not give up on Syria.

Both Russia and the Syrian regime must understand – and this Conference is the way for them to understand - that we will not reduce our commitment to UNSCR 2254 and the efforts of United Nations Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen. Geir, congratulations for your work. We will not relax our sanctions to maintain pressure on the Assad regime nor normalise relations before people will be safe to go back home.

This conflict needs a political solution. We will continue supporting you, Special Envoy Pedersen, in your efforts to renew the political process. This requires all sides to ensure a positive outcome to the 8th round of meetings of the Constitutional Committee. And the Syrian regime and its sponsors must understand that we remain steadfast. But equally, that we can lift the pressure and unlock the funds for the reconstruction of Syria and the return of its refugees. But only if there is real change and a genuine readiness for compromise with credible commitments to political reform. These are the conditions – readiness for compromise and credible commitments for political reforms.

Today, it is a good occasion to reiterate our joint commitment to the future of the Syrian people, through your pledges - which I am thanking in advance. Thank you for your support and simply for being here to attest our joint commitment to the Syrian people, to the future of Syria.

Yes, the Syrian people will not be forgotten in spite of all the crises which are looming in the world. Let us start our Conference, let us be as generous as we have always been, continue our efforts and support to the Syrian people.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-224864

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