



## EUROPEAN UNION

### Joint press release

Brussels, 25 July 2006

## EU action in response to the crisis in Lebanon

The European Union has been actively engaged in efforts to respond to the crisis in Lebanon and its repercussions. It has acted quickly and continuously to address the evacuation needs and the worsening humanitarian crisis, deploying a range of EU and national resources. The EU has made demarches at a high level to obtain the opening of humanitarian corridors for the delivery of aid to victims.

A coordinated effort in Beirut, Cyprus, national capitals and Brussels has been underway from the onset of the crisis.

On the diplomatic front, the EU High Representative for the common foreign and security policy has been actively engaged in efforts to address the crisis, notably by going to the region twice in the last few days. At the Council on 17 July, EU Foreign Ministers assessed the situation and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. The Presidency has been in close contact with the different parties. It will lead an EU Troika visit to the region in the coming days.

The Presidency has been actively coordinating the situation in the consular field. Consular cooperation among capitals and on the ground has been active from the onset of hostilities. The EU has made demarches allowing for an evacuation corridor towards Southern Lebanon.

The EU has triggered the Community Civil Protection Mechanism to help Cyprus address the difficult logistical situation resulting from two large influx of evacuees and will continue to provide assistance to the Cypriot authorities.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, EU action in response to the crisis in Lebanon has focused on addressing three linked issues: the evacuation of EU citizens from Lebanon and their repatriation (mainly from Cyprus); the evacuation of third country nationals; and the humanitarian needs of the affected population in Lebanon as well as refugees in Syria.

On 26 July, the EU will be represented in the Lebanon Conference in Rome by the Presidency (Finnish Foreign Minister), the High Representative and the Commissioner for External Relations.

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# Overview of the EU's response

High Representative Javier Solana visited Beirut on 16 July and met the Lebanese Prime Minister and the President of the Lebanese Parliament. After briefing EU ministers at the Council on 17 July, he returned to the region (Israel, Palestinian Territories and Egypt) from 18 to 21 July. He met with Israeli Prime Minister Olmert as well as Foreign Minister Livni and Defence Minister Peretz. He then went to Ramallah and Gaza and met with Palestinian President Abbas. In Egypt, he had talks with President Mubarak and Foreign Minister Abul Gheit.

Commissioner Stavros Dimas, responsible for the Civil Protection Mechanism, is travelling to Cyprus and will be meeting with the Cypriot government at 13.30 today in order to discuss EU support with the repatriation of evacuees.

After the meeting in Rome on 26 July of the Lebanon Conference, the Presidency (Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja) and the Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, are expected to travel to the region.

The EU has drawn the attention of the Israeli authorities to the obligations of the parties to the conflict to international humanitarian law, notably regarding protection of civilian population and access for relief organisations.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, since the start of the crisis, the Presidency has been actively coordinating the situation, in particular through daily teleconferences among head of consular crisis units, the European Commission and the Council Secretariat.

The Presidency has been liaising closely with the German Ambassador in Lebanon (as acting Presidency on the spot). EU Heads of Mission in Tel Aviv and Cyprus have been in regular contact to coordinate the local situation. The EU Joint Situation Centre in the Council Secretariat has updated Member States regularly on developments, in particular on the evacuation situation, including recourse being made to military assets on a national basis.

## **Evacuations from Lebanon**

More than 40 000 evacuees have so far been transferred to Cyprus.

Between 17 and 21 July, 27 ships operating under various flags brought some 18 000 evacuees from Lebanon to Cyprus. A further 13 ships were expected to arrive over the weekend. By air, some 23 491 evacuees have landed in Cyprus, of which 12 491 are EU citizens. On 22 July, 5 197 EU citizens and 2 630 non-EU citizens remained in Cyprus.

An Israeli officer has been designated as sole contact point for all evacuation operations. An EU military focal point in Tel Aviv has also been appointed.

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The Finnish Presidency, the High Representative and the Commission have all made demarches at the highest level to allow an evacuation corridor to be opened towards southern Lebanon, and an arrangement has been found with Israel.

There are still pockets for EU citizens blocked in southern Lebanon, especially in Blida, where the situation is becoming extremely serious, including due to the lack of basic commodities.

### **Onward repatriation of EU citizens from Cyprus**

In Cyprus, there is serious overcrowding at the ports of Larnaka and Limassol. The Cypriot authorities have asked Member States to coordinate as much as possible the arrival of ships with the departure of aircraft so that transit on the island is reduced to a strict minimum. However, manoeuvring in harbours, disembarkation procedures, air slots, and shuttling back and forth from the airport inevitably lead to delays. Coordination by Heads of Mission in Cyprus is helping to tackle the issue.

The Cypriot authorities activated the Community Civil Protection Mechanism on 22 July, requesting assistance from the Member States and the Commission to help remove bottlenecks in the evacuation operation. In response, the Commission's Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC) immediately established an expert team in Larnaka to assist the local authorities and to assess needs for further European support.

Several Member States have sent civil protection teams to Cyprus in order to assist in the repatriation of EU citizens to their respective home countries.

### **Evacuation and repatriation of third country nationals**

Approximately 8 000 third country nationals have registered with their embassies for evacuation from Lebanon, but the scale of needs could potentially be much greater. There are significant numbers working in the country from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nepal, Vietnam, Ghana and Iraq.

The primary evacuation corridor for third country nationals is the land route north of Beirut via Tripoli into Syria.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has been requested by a number of third countries to assist in the evacuation and repatriation of third country nationals from Lebanon. The Commission has been in close contact with IOM on the arrangements.

Work is underway by the Commission to prepare funding under the Rapid Reaction Mechanism, to support the evacuation and repatriation of up to 10 000 of the most urgent cases.

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## **The humanitarian situation in Lebanon**

The humanitarian situation in Lebanon has seriously deteriorated, in particular in the south of the country. Half a million people are displaced, and the figure could increase further if hostilities continue. Some 150 000 refugees are said to be in Syria, of which 100 000 in need of assistance.

Principal humanitarian needs are medical assistance, water, food and shelter, and support to public health, water and sanitation systems in Beirut. A central issue is the provision of secure humanitarian access to reach people in need of assistance. The International Committee of the Red Cross and UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance have requested the establishment of secure humanitarian corridors, but this has not yet been answered.

The Finnish Presidency's Minister for Foreign Trade and Development, Paula Lehtomäki, and the Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, have written to Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence stressing the obligations of both sides in the conflict under International Humanitarian Law and the urgent need to ensure access and safe passage for humanitarian workers and supplies. The letter also underlines the continuing problems of humanitarian access caused by movement restrictions in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Commission has adopted a EUR 10 million package of emergency aid, and is preparing to make further financial contributions notably in response to the UN's flash appeal for USD 150 million issued yesterday. First indications are that it may need to draw on the EU's Emergency Aid Reserve. The Commission's humanitarian service ECHO has sent a team of 6 humanitarian experts to Beirut to assess needs, monitor the provision of humanitarian aid and contribute to the overall coordination of international relief efforts. Member States are also providing bilateral humanitarian aid.

The MIC has responded to a request from the Lebanese authorities and the ICRC to provide material assistance to the conflict-affected population. On 21 July, it transmitted a detailed request for medicines, supplies, materials for shelter and construction and fire-fighting equipment, and several Member States responded immediately. French experts have been in Lebanon since early last week, an Italian team arrived on 22 July with urgently-needed humanitarian supplies and two Greek military vessels have brought 45 tonnes of humanitarian supplies.

In addition, the MIC today deployed an EU civil protection coordination and assessment team, which will operate from the Commission's Delegation in Beirut. Its primary tasks will be to coordinate the delivery of in-kind contributions provided by Member States through the Civil Protection Mechanism and to assess further civil protection needs.

The Cypriot authorities have confirmed that their infrastructure will be available for the urgent dispatch of European humanitarian assistance to Lebanon and the wider region.

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