

Translation performed in August 2021 for ETC Europe, Contractor of the Directorate-General for Translation at the European Commission

Blog Post of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell

## Source text

# After hitting the bottom, it is crucial for Lebanon to go back to the surface

*05/08/2021 – HR/VP blog - A year ago, a huge explosion shook Beirut. Since then, the Lebanese crisis has worsened and the political class has been unable to tackle it. I was attending yesterday, together with EU Council President Charles Michel, a third international conference to take stock of the situation and look for additional support for Lebanon. The EU is already helping the Lebanese population, and stands ready to help more if the necessary steps are taken by the Lebanese leadership. At the same time, the EU has adopted a new framework for restrictive measures against those who prevent solving this crisis.*

We all remember how one year ago, on 4 August 2020, 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate fertiliser exploded on the dockside at Beirut port, killing more than 200 people, injuring thousands, and inflicting severe damage to tens of thousands of homes.

Experts have estimated that the explosion was the equivalent of 1,000 to 1,500 tonnes of TNT – about one 10th of the intensity of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. This makes it one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history, far bigger than any conventional weapon. How did this happen? Why were no measures in place to prevent such catastrophe? One year on, the investigation that is to shed light over the causes of this tragedy is still to deliver results.

*“Experts have estimated that the explosion was the equivalent of 1,000 to 1,500 tonnes of TNT – about one 10th of the intensity of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945”*

During my June visit to Lebanon, I met with the Lebanese leadership and with members of its civil society. I was very clear in conveying our concerns, and our intentions. Government formation was stuck as the different political factions failed to compromise repeatedly and continued haggling over the allocation of ministerial portfolios.

No one was taking the bold measures we and the international community at large have called on to stop an economic collapse of historical proportions – the World Bank considers the Lebanese economic crisis one of the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crises in the world in recent times.

According to the United Nations, extreme poverty registered a threefold increase from 2019 to 2020, rising from 8% to 23% of the population. A recent assessment by UNICEF estimates that 77% of households in Lebanon do not have enough food or enough money to buy food. In Syrian refugee households, the figure reaches 99%.

This economic meltdown has also affected the capabilities of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), a key guarantor of Lebanon's stability. Before the actual crisis, most of the 80,000 personnel employed by the institution earned the equivalent of \$800 a month, but due to the Lebanese currency losing its value, they now take home \$70-\$90. It was important indeed that France, with the support of Italy, organised on 17 June an international conference on supporting the LAF, an institution that the EU has collaborated with for many years. The stability and security of Lebanon are essential for the region and for the EU as well.

*“We hope Najib Mikati will succeed as soon as possible in forming a government, because we are back to square one and many precious months have been squandered”*

The country has been led by a caretaker government for a year, with no real progress on the necessary reforms, including on talks about a much-needed IMF programme. The negotiations between President Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Hariri to form a government have dragged on for over nine months due to divergences on the cabinet composition but also to personal mutual mistrust. After nine months of negotiations, on 15 July, Saad Hariri recused himself from forming a government due to divergences with President Aoun. Following parliamentary consultations last week, Najib Mikati has been nominated Prime Minister-designate. He is now working to form a government and we hope that the new PM-designate will succeed as soon as possible, because we are back to square one and many precious months have been squandered. But although the chances of seeing a government being formed have somewhat increased – this is not a done deal. While public and political pressure to form a government are high, the political difficulties encountered by Hariri in recent months remain unchanged. At least a compromise should be found, even with a limited mandate to prepare for next year's elections and discuss a relief programme with the international donor community.

To address these situation in Lebanon, the EU Council adopted on 30 July a framework for targeted restrictive measures. And we are ready to use our toolbox to effect change in Lebanon – both positive but also negative measures. In fact, all the Lebanese public figures I spoke to during my visit in June told me that the potential use of sanctions was essential in order to exert enough pressure on political leaders (although everyone is blaming the others for the stalemate). There is no two ways about this: there is no blaming anyone else but the Lebanese political class. The current state of affairs in Lebanon is a self-inflicted, man-made catastrophe and Lebanon's political leadership bears responsibility for steering the country towards recovery now.

*“We are ready to use our toolbox to effect change in Lebanon – both positive but also negative measures.”*

The recently adopted framework provides thus for the possibility of imposing sanctions against persons and entities who are responsible for undermining democracy or the rule of law in Lebanon through any of the following actions:

- obstructing or undermining the democratic political process by persistently hampering the formation of a government or by obstructing or seriously undermining the holding of elections;
- obstructing or undermining the implementation of plans approved by Lebanese authorities and supported by relevant international actors, including the EU, to improve accountability and good governance in the public sector or the implementation of critical economic reforms, including in the banking and financial sectors and including the adoption of transparent and non-discriminatory legislation on the export of capital;
- serious financial misconduct, concerning public funds, insofar as the acts concerned are covered by the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, and the unauthorised export of capital.

Eventual sanctions would consist of a travel ban to the EU and an asset freeze for persons, and an asset freeze for entities. In addition, EU persons and entities would be forbidden from making funds available to those listed.

There are not any names on this list at present. And we would greatly prefer not to have to use this instrument. Therefore, the conference gave me the opportunity to repeat our key message: a government that can take on the current challenges for the good of all Lebanese must be formed soonest. The investigation on the Beirut port explosion must be completed. An agreement with the IMF is urgently needed. Preparations for the 2022 elections must commence in earnest. Long due key reforms – the electricity sector, the banking system, etc. – must be enacted and implemented. Nothing new here: same tasks still pending, just less and less time to get things done.

On the positive side, we are also ready to continue using positive measures to help Lebanon. In 2020 alone, the EU provided around EUR 333 million assistance to this country. We are ready to assist Lebanon further once an agreement with the IMF has been concluded. We could also deploy a new observation mission to help with the elections next year. We are also ready to discuss with a new government the priorities and key areas of cooperation between EU and Lebanon until 2027. There is thus a variety of possibilities to continue helping Lebanon.

*“The international community was, once more very clear: we can help, but Lebanon must shoulder its part of the burden, and do it fast.”*

At yesterday’s international conference in support of the most vulnerable in Lebanon, organised by France and the UN, the international community was, once more very clear: we can help, but Lebanon must shoulder its part of the burden, and do it fast.

As I said before: the people of Lebanon deserve better and have already shown the world how incredibly resilient and resourceful they can be. They rebuilt their country after 15 years of civil war – and I know from my own country, Spain, how daunting such a task can be. I am therefore convinced that if there is a unity of purpose across all groups and formations, Lebanon can get back on its feet again.

Lebanese people should then take a hard look at the tenets of their country, at their social contract, at their economic model, and introduce the changes that might be necessary to ensure the sustainability of a safe, stable and prosperous Lebanon. It is by exploring with a critical eye the fundamentals of their country that the Lebanese will find the right answers, and we are ready to assist in this process if they so wish.

The famous French moviemaker Claude Lelouch held that, *C'est en touchant le fond que l'on refait surface* ("It is by hitting the bottom that we get back to the surface"). This image is quite befitting of the country's present situation: the only way is up, Lebanon must urgently go back to the surface now.