

Possibility for the EU to play a key role in the Middle Eastern conflict

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“Finding a comprehensive political solution to the conflict in the Middle East and the reconstruction soon to begin are a test of the European Union’s external policy. The EU has the possibility to play a key role, both in humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, and in finding a political solution, because the EU is the only international actor that has credibility in the eyes of all parties to the conflict,” said Paula Lehtomäki, Finland’s Minister for Foreign Trade and Development, who returned yesterday from her trip to Lebanon and Israel.

Minister Lehtomäki, who represented the EU Presidency, visited the area with Louis Michel, European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid. They determined the situation concerning the need for humanitarian assistance in Lebanon and Israel, and investigated what could be done to intensify the humanitarian aid efforts already in place.

Lehtomäki pointed out that the need for humanitarian assistance in Southern Lebanon is enormous, and that the ceasefire has clearly improved possibilities to ensure access so that aid reaches its destination. People in Lebanon started returning to their homes from the temporary camps immediately after the ceasefire came into force. The massive proportions of the return traffic, and the speed at which people began their return, has taken aid organisations by surprise and has set new challenges with regard to redirection of assistance. When people began returning to their home areas, the temporary shelter camps were emptied within a few days. In addition, the logistics situation in Southern Lebanon is difficult and transport vehicles delivering aid have had trouble reaching their destinations.

“Following the ceasefire, a comprehensive solution for the entire region must be found; that is the only way to achieve lasting peace and sustainable development for the whole region. In devising a political solution, the situation of the Palestinians must not be forgotten; besides the West Bank, we must also remember the difficult situation in Gaza,” Minister Lehtomäki stressed.

Reconstruction has not begun yet, but the EU Commission has already begun a process to assess reconstruction needs. In the minister’s opinion, reconstruction must also reinforce the sovereignty of the Lebanese Government so it is able to keep the entire country under its control. The duration of the reconstruction period is difficult to estimate at this stage, but it is clear that it will be a tremendous undertaking. There is an urgent need for housing, schools and hospitals; other aspects of the country’s infrastructure will be targeted for reconstruction at a later stage.

“The EU will be a leading force in the reconstruction process; the EU Member States and the Commission have jointly pledged 115 million euros in humanitarian aid to Lebanon. Some 15,000 to 30,000 homes in Lebanon have been destroyed, and as many as 100,000 people are without housing. Aid organisations have only a couple of months to act before winter sets in,” Lehtomäki stated.