

International partners, meeting at UN, pledge to help Lebanon tackle multiple challenges

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Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today convened the inaugural meeting of the International Support Group for Lebanon which is aimed at helping the country address the multiple challenges it faces, including hosting nearly 800,000 refugees who have fled the conflict in Syria.

“The inauguration of this International Support Group for Lebanon sends an important public signal that the international community and the United Nations are standing with Lebanon at this time of heightened pressure,” Mr. Ban said in his remarks to the gathering, which took place on the margins of the General Assembly’s annual high-level debate.

“I know that others are also ready to join as advocates to see Lebanon and its people through this crisis and on to a better future.”

The creation of the Group follows the appeal made in July by the Security Council for “strong, coordinated international support for Lebanon” as well as calls by Lebanese President Michel Sleiman for assistance in maintaining the country’s stability and addressing the multiple challenges it now faces.

Among those challenges is hosting almost 800,000 refugees from Syria who have sought safety and assistance after fleeing the conflict that has raged in their homeland since March 2011.

In his address to the General Assembly yesterday, President Sleiman called the Syrian refugee crisis “the most pressing and biggest burden” facing Lebanon, and said the country’s resources have been stretched to their capacity, with more than one-fourth of the population now made up of Syrian refugees.

Mr. Ban noted that the number of refugees in Lebanon is expected to surpass 1 million by the end of this year – an extraordinary challenge for any country to face – and commended the Government and people for their openness and generosity.

“The refugee presence, and the crisis in Syria more generally, are also placing significant pressure on Lebanon’s public services, infrastructure and economy,” he stated, adding that it is also having “profound” repercussions on the country’s security.

He added that the Group will work closely with all stakeholders to assist Lebanon in those areas where it is being most affected by the Syrian crisis, including assistance to refugees and host communities, structural and financial support to the Government, and strengthening the capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Support in these areas will also contribute to the longer-term needs of the country.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, told the meeting that the current number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon – 760,000 – can be likened to 57 million people entering the United States.

“Lebanon requires massive support from the international community,” he stated, appealing to countries to take refugees from Lebanon, which has assumed its responsibilities on behalf of the international community. “It’s high time for the international community to assume its responsibilities on behalf of the Lebanese people.”

In a summary issued at the end of the meeting, participants expressed their appreciation for Mr. Sleiman’s leadership in seeking to uphold Lebanon’s sovereignty, unity and stability and the continuity of State institutions, to promote dialogue and to safeguard Lebanon from the impact of the Syrian crisis. They also condemned the recent terrorist bombings in Lebanon and underscored the need for those responsible to be brought to justice, stating that there should be no return to impunity.

Commending the country’s generosity in hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, they highlighted the urgent need to increase and expedite assistance both to refugees and to vulnerable communities affected by the crisis within a coordinated humanitarian and development response.

They also welcomed discussions between the World Bank, the Government of Lebanon and the UN on establishing additional funding mechanisms, including possibly a multi-donor trust fund, to help address Lebanon’s immediate and longer-term structural and development needs.

In addition, participants strongly underlined the urgency of formation of an empowered government in Lebanon, stressing the importance of this if the many security, humanitarian and development challenges facing Lebanon are to be met effectively.

The challenges facing Lebanon and the establishment of the International Support Group also featured in talks held today between the Secretary-General and Mr. Sleiman.

Lebanon