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EU Commissioner Georgieva and UNHCR's Guterres view refugee projects in Lebanon

European Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva and UN refugee agency head António Guterres on Saturday praised the people of Lebanon and other nearby states for their generosity toward hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees.

Ms Georgieva, the EU Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, and Mr Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, spent Saturday morning in Lebanon's Bekaa region with Syrians who have fled the violence in their homeland. They viewed humanitarian programmes for both refugees and the Lebanese families who are sharing their homes and resources.

The 157,000 registered refugees in Lebanon are scattered across some 500 municipalities, often living in crowded rental housing, with over-burdened host families, or in various types of collective centres and renovated accommodation – much of it substandard. There are no refugee camps.

Noting that the number of Syrian refugees seeking help in neighbouring states throughout the region has surpassed half a million and continues to climb by some 3,200 per day, Ms Georgieva said much more needed to be done as the crisis worsens and winter sets in. "I am here in my capacity as Humanitarian Aid Commissioner to see at first hand the extent of the needs created by the Syrian crisis," she said. "The European Union will not stand idle as the crisis deepens. I have this week released an additional 30 million euros in humanitarian assistance, bringing the total committed so far by the European Union to nearly 400 million euros."

Mr Guterres said: "As we have seen here in Bekaa today, Lebanon and its people have welcomed Syrian refugees with open borders as well as open arms," Mr Guterres said. "Their generosity is an example to the world, which can also help by supporting humanitarian work here and around the region. That is why we at UNHCR are very grateful to Commissioner Georgieva, to the European Commission and to the EU member states for their combined efforts that have provided more than half of all international aid to date for the Syrian crisis."

Both humanitarian leaders noted that the huge number of refugees in need of help placed enormous social and economic strains on Lebanon. They urged the entire international community to show solidarity by supporting humanitarian programmes in the country, which would help ensure that borders remained open to Syrians seeking protection.

"I wish to put on record Europe's gratitude to Lebanon, which has shown remarkable hospitality to all refugees coming from Syria," Ms Georgieva said. Lebanon is also facilitating the work of humanitarians. In this very fluid crisis it is essential that Lebanon and its neighbours keep their borders open. "For our part I can assure you that we will meet all sudden additional burdens on the country with additional humanitarian funding. We started with seven million euros. We are now transferring funds that will raise our contribution to UN agencies and NGOs in Lebanon to 21 million euros. And more funding will be available very soon."

Mr Guterres and Ms Georgieva also appealed to all parties in the conflict to respect international humanitarian law, to provide unhindered access to humanitarian aid and to ensure the safe passage of civilians fleeing the fighting. "Millions of Syrians are affected by this conflict and hundreds of thousands are uprooted and on the move in search of safety," Mr Guterres said. "Getting help to them is difficult and dangerous. And those seeking protection in neighbouring countries are often in extreme danger right up to the borders. The safety of the civilian population is of paramount importance."

Another immediate priority is protection from the cold as temperatures drop to freezing in some parts of the region. Many refugees show up with nothing. The cold is a major threat, especially for children and those already weakened by hunger and the often perilous ordeal of escaping Syria.

The European Commission is one of UNHCR's largest partners. Its programmes cover a range of humanitarian needs both inside Syria and in the surrounding countries. In addition to UNHCR, its projects are implemented by several humanitarian partners, including several other UN agencies; the Red Cross/Red Crescent and a number of international NGOs.

In Syria, EC-funded projects for displaced people and host families include emergency medical assistance; protection; food and nutritional items; water; sanitation; shelter; winter preparations; and psycho-social care. Vulnerable Palestinian refugees in Syria also receive assistance. Outside Syria, EC-backed programmes help both refugees and host communities and include shelter; winterization; food; hygiene kits; emergency medical rehabilitation for those wounded; and legal assistance.

Ms Georgieva and Mr Guterres were scheduled to meet Saturday afternoon with Prime Minister Najib Miqati before traveling on to Jordan.

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