

CAPTAIN'S TABLE

By John Chambers

Very few times in life does one have the opportunity to help shape the future of a country, a region and indirectly the world. We have such an opportunity today.

A peaceful and secure Lebanon has the potential to become an anchor of stability in the Middle East. And Lebanon's fundamental characteristics – a skilled workforce, entrepreneurial spirit, and commitment to democracy – give us hope that, with support from world citizens and businesses, Lebanon can become this anchor.

In late September, I had the privilege to accompany a US-presidential delegation of business leaders to Lebanon to listen, learn and help solve one of the toughest issues a country can ever face – how to recover from a disaster and rebuild a nation for future generations.

In Lebanon we found not a political issue, but a human one. While there we viewed first hand the challenges this country faces. And we heard personal accounts by Lebanese citizens, students and leaders that both inspired and surprised us.

Lebanon is a country filled with hope, but facing uncertainty. It is filled with business leaders with innovative ideas but lacking resources to implement them. And, most disheartening, it is full of well-educated students who told us they would have to leave Lebanon to find a job. Consider that one fact alone – the economic and social impact of an entire generation, a country's future, forced to leave.

The window of hope and opportunity in Lebanon is open. But the time to act is now. Together with Lebanese government and business leaders, we have launched the Lebanon Partnership Fund. This initiative will mobilise funds and public-private partnerships to help rebuild a sustainable economic and

social foundation in Lebanon. In doing so, our hope is to not only contribute to the healing of a nation, but to the stability of a region.

On its part, the European Union has called for efficient and strong action in the reconstruction efforts of Lebanon and has put in place funds and mechanisms to support the reconstruction as well as supporting crucial political and economic reforms. The European Commission recently boosted its contribution to Lebanon to over €100 million for 2006 at the international donor conference that took place in Stockholm.

It is not enough to help the Lebanese rebuild Lebanon as it was; we must try to help them build a Lebanon for the future. No single group can make this difference; and funds alone will not make a sustainable change.

The real opportunity is to help the people of Lebanon build a long-term economic foundation, starting with a strong education system, job creation and robust infrastructure. To do so, we must contribute not only funds, but also offer our business expertise.

This is something we have and can readily share. It may be as simple as expanding an existing internship programme to Lebanese university graduates. It could be an extension of corporate training programmes to workers in Lebanon. Or it might be helping a small business – the majority of Lebanon's economy – build and maintain a web presence.

We have an opportunity to see past the politics to the human realities – there are people, much like us, full of optimism and hope, who need help. Certainly there is risk. But the greater risk is that of inaction. Together, we have the resources and the opportunity.



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