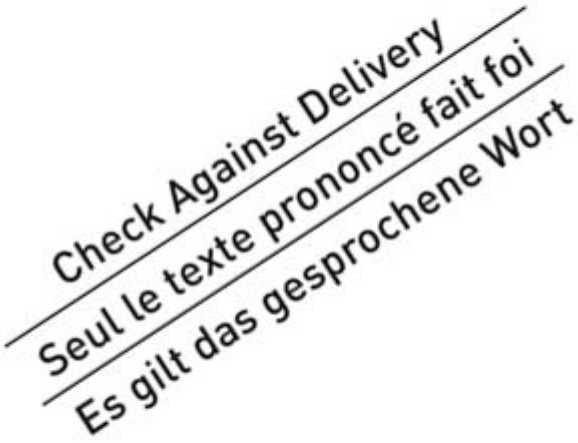
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Remarks on the situation in Syria



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Honourable members

I have learnt today with great sadness of the tragic death yesterday of Ahmad Shihadeh, a policy officer of the EU delegation in Syria. He was killed during a rocket attack on the Damascus suburb of Deraa, where he lived. Ahmad died while providing humanitarian help to the community. Our thoughts are with his family and friends and his colleagues in the delegation.

We are all agreed that the situation in Syria is appalling, Bashir Al Assad should leave power, the fighting must stop and the country - according to some reports 70% destroyed - must be rebuilt

The situation reflects in part the inability of the international community to find a coherent, united way to respond to the horror that is being perpetrated and to act collectively to protect the people. Without a Security Council mandate or a clear situation on the ground, military action by the international community is not under consideration.

I want to be clear too - on the occasions this year when I have put the arms embargo on the agenda of the foreign affairs council - with all options to be discussed - no member state has proposed that it be lifted to arm the opposition. All member states have wanted to make sure that support for the people and for the opposition of non-lethal equipment and technical assistance is available. And this I reflected in my meeting with General Idriss a few days ago where I invited him to let me know urgently what assistance we could supply.

So we have to work in the situation we find ourselves - with all its constraints. This is a messy and complicated situation on the ground - not everyone involved in the fighting shares our values or vision for the future of Syria. As Mr Brahimi said when he came at my invitation to the FAC, there is no easy solution. If there were, we would have found it by now. And we have to work for a political solution that will find a lasting peace.

And we should support all those who are actively trying to find that solution. Mr Brahimi and Sheikh Moaz Al Khatib in particular. And we continue to talk with Russia, China - all members of the Security Council as well as others across the region, and indeed the world, to find a way through.

Commissioner Georgieva who of course has done a fantastic job on humanitarian aid, has been very clear: from a humanitarian perspective there are no military fixes either.

Humanitarian corridors, buffer zones and other ideas of the same kind are not viable solutions. As Kristalina Georgieva has made clear in meeting with members of the EP with a map of conflict in her hands: Where are you going to place a corridor or a buffer zone? How would we protect it and the humanitarian workers in the absence of a UNSCR? Our priority must be to help innocent civilians. As she has explained to all of us: our chances of success greatly depend on our ability to maintain the neutrality of our humanitarian aid.

I strongly appeal to the Syrian Authorities to allow more international humanitarian relief workers into the country to ensure aid reaches all affected areas. I also reiterate my plea for all sides to respect International Humanitarian Law.

The brutal violence used by Bashar al-Assad and his regime cannot be justified; it has left over 70,000 killed, has caused one million to flee Syria, and has made three million people internally displaced.

We are permanently adapting to the situation on the ground: every single financial instrument available to the EU and its Member States has been engaged in our joint efforts to assist the Syrians inside and outside the country.

We provide assistance to refugees and their host countries; we support human rights activists to raise their cases and students to continue their studies; and we help women and children simply to survive.

But we have to be more effective and innovative in our work; we have therefore decided to expand our help to the Syrian Opposition Coalition and its Assistance Coordination Unit as well as the Free Syrian Army.

Syrians – wherever they are - must not feel abandoned by the international community. We are looking into the best way of channelling our assistance across the lines of fire and taking measures on the ground to reach those who need support.

But we also make sure that our support reaches the right people and does not fall into the hands of extremists. So far we have provided €100 million of non-humanitarian support. It is not yet of course enough but we are determined to do as much as we possibly can.

We are also leading international donor co-ordination efforts and are preparing the ground for joint assessment activities for the important work to come once the conflict is over.

Both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries the EU is the biggest donor to the crisis. I pay tribute to the tireless work of Kristalina. Following the Kuwait conference on 30 January the total of our humanitarian assistance will reach €600 million.

€436 million are already committed: €200 million from the EU budget and the rest from the Member States. I want to thank this House for its help in mobilising funds from the Emergency Aid Reserve.

The latest tranche became available in December: but let me flag already now that more will be needed. That assistance has provided shelter, support, emergency health care, water and sanitation; all of this implemented by the Red Cross, by UN organizations and the High Commissioner for Refugees, and by NGOs.

We have also mobilized in-kind assistance from EU Member States for Syrian refugees, using the EU civil protection mechanism – in April of this year for Turkey; and in September for Jordan.

It is not easy. We want to reach more people in need. Together with our partners we try to deliver assistance to all areas of Syria, including those which are fiercely disputed.

Yet access is challenging, often impossible, and far too many innocent civilians are beyond the reach of the humanitarian agencies and workers. We must use all possible channels to deliver assistance

We know too that the constant stream of refugees puts an unsustainable burden on their socio-economic and, in some cases, political stability of the neighbours of Syria. Just to give you an illustration: 8% of Lebanon's inhabitants are refugees; 6% in Jordan - this is becoming critical. Like many of you I have been to the camps in Jordan and have seen the dire situation. We cannot rule out that the conflict will drag on and we must be prepared for a direct impact on the EU.

In a similar way, we have to prepare our "day after" planning. That means that we need to ensure that we are able to bring about even now the minimum of normalcy, with a governing authority where we can ensure order, with basic services being supplied. Success depends on the willingness of all members of the international community to rally behind a political solution. The EU must keep the momentum and avoid that this initiative starts to disappear. We must support efforts to explore the willingness of both sides to engage in the first steps of any approach.

We know from our recent contacts with Lakhdar Brahimi, who came to the Foreign Affairs Council, and from meetings with Sheikh al-Khatib that they are serious but cautious.

Yet we agree that a political solution is necessary. In this spirit, we will continue to act with the clear intention of showing Assad that the EU is mobilising all efforts to oppose what is happening

What is most important is to keep the momentum of al-Khatib's initiative by creating space for dialogue.

We need to work closely with Russia and Arab partners, and continue our contacts with Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In short, continue to explore options of engagement that may lead to a political dialogue further down the road. As Lakhdar Brahimi said to me and our ministers a few days ago at the Foreign Affairs Council, the "Assad-must-go" slogan is not a substitute for a political process. A process is what is needed to get out of the current impasse.