**European Commission -
Speech**

Speech by Commissioner Lahbib at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2025

Brussels, 6 February 2025

It's a pleasure to be with you today. I would like to start with two simple words: thank you. You breathe vitality into Europe's actions all across the world — I have seen it with my own eyes.

In today's more dangerous world, the European Union is a power for peace and security. And I would argue, a power for more compassion and more humanity in the darkest corners. Compassion and humanity. This may not be the direction of the prevailing winds today, but we will not be blown off course. We will not be blown in the direction of fear and isolation. We will not withdraw into ourselves.

Our roots are anchored, strong and solid, in our convictions and values. Open to the world. This will never change, no matter how strong the winds of cynicism whipping across the planet.

The EU is a powerful and committed humanitarian actor across the world. I will make sure this continues. While others step back, the EU is stepping up our humanitarian commitment. This year we have increased our initial humanitarian aid budget to 1.9 billion euros. As Team Europe, we provide roughly one-third of global assistance.

But the needs are simply too great. Everyone in the international community must shoulder their responsibility. Everyone should do their part. The funding gap is getting bigger, leaving millions in need. The EU alone cannot fill this gap left by others.

Today I would like to focus on International Humanitarian Law and tackling global Fragility.

International Humanitarian Law is at the heart of our external action — in Ukraine, Syria, Gaza, Sudan, and in the DRC. Never before have we seen International Humanitarian Law so blatantly attacked, so disrespected, so cast into question.

Never before have we faced so many obstacles in helping the most vulnerable: shutting down access, killing humanitarian workers, attacking children and schools, and bombing hospitals. This must stop.

We must defend International Humanitarian Law with full force and step up humanitarian diplomacy to protect civilians, critical infrastructure, and humanitarian workers. International Humanitarian Law must be our guiding light. Always and everywhere. It is not à la carte — only to be respected when convenient or when it suits us.

It is your job — it is all our jobs — to be vigilant. To be on guard. To defend International Humanitarian Law whenever it is threatened. If we don't do it, who will? It is our responsibility. It is our moral duty. And it is in our own interest.

Fragility has skyrocketed in countries across the world. Wars, political instability, and economic hardship are driving communities to their knees, making people more vulnerable to natural disasters, migration, or epidemics. In the EU, we are determined to tackle this.

We should therefore develop a comprehensive and integrated EU approach to confronting fragility across the world. Without delay. It is a top priority and more urgent than ever. Today over 300 million people around the world need humanitarian assistance. If this was the EU, it would be 2 out of 3 people. Yes, many of these crises start outside of Europe, but they have strong implications for the EU.

Climate change concerns us all. But low-income countries suffer more than developed ones. We all know the figures. Yet despite this, fragile countries and communities get less private investment and less climate finance. They also have problems in accessing development funding and maintaining the *acquis* of past development. This must change.

Politically isolated countries or regions, and those with protracted crises, are often left to humanitarian organisations alone. This is not sustainable or effective, and it is not the best use of our limited funds.

We need strong EU cooperation, coupled with a long-term vision, to be truly effective in tackling fragility. The sheer number of crises calls for a more united, strategic, and systematic approach — across all our policies, tools, and funding. And just as important, we need our Member States on board, working as one Team Europe.

Not acting also has a cost. Most dramatically, for the people and communities in dire humanitarian need. But not only. It also directly impacts our own security, risks such as radicalisation, terrorism, displacement, illegal migration, and human trafficking. Not acting also shifts the geopolitical balance, giving countries like Russia and China an opportunity to fill the void in our absence.

In recent weeks, I visited Ukraine, Syria, Jordan and Türkiye. I saw with my own eyes the impact of EU humanitarian aid in the life of one child, one woman, one refugee. A warm meal, clean water, a bed to sleep in, a school. For a generation of kids, it means more than learning their A, B, Cs. It means hope for a future outside a refugee camp. A dream. These are the lives behind the abstract numbers in a spreadsheet of humanitarian funding.

As the first Commissioner to visit Syria since the fall of the Assad regime, I met with the new Syrian leader al-Sharaa, civil society, and humanitarian partners. My message for the Syrian people: the EU wants to work with you to build an inclusive Syria. The journey will be long, but we want to be right by your side.

EU Foreign Ministers' recent decision to ease sanctions is a clear sign of our support for the transitional government. This is a strong signal that the EU has chosen to play a role in rebuilding the future of Syria. Just yesterday, UN humanitarian flights started again to Damascus, the result of my discussions with the Syrian leadership. We are delivering for the Syrian people.

I have also recently come back from Ukraine, where the humanitarian situation remains dire. I spoke with women and children in shelters. They had one message for me, for all of us: Don't forget us. Don't get tired of standing with us.

In the EU, we are not tired. We will continue our strong support because Ukrainians are fighting for their freedom. They are fighting for our values, our security, and our European future. I also saw Ukraine's civil protection teams in action — innovating, adapting, never giving up. In the EU, we can learn a lot from the Ukrainians about preparing for new threats.

In Gaza, we welcome the ceasefire. Now it must hold. Access is starting to open up, and this is encouraging. But the needs are immense, and we must continue to be there to alleviate the suffering.

We cannot turn a blind eye to the bloody civil war in Sudan that has killed tens of thousands, displaced millions, and where famine has been declared. The lives of so many are at risk with aid supplies not reaching people in need. We are working with our partners for greater access. Too often, in conflicts, warring parties use access as a weapon of war. This must stop.

Dear ambassadors, you are the first face our partners see. You are the first voice they hear when Europe extends a hand to the world. The voice of a trusted and reliable partner, always ready to engage, always ready to strengthen our partnerships, and always ready to forge new ones based on shared interests. We need your strong voice and your long experience. Together, let's show the world that Europe not only speaks of a shared humanity — we act to defend it.

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