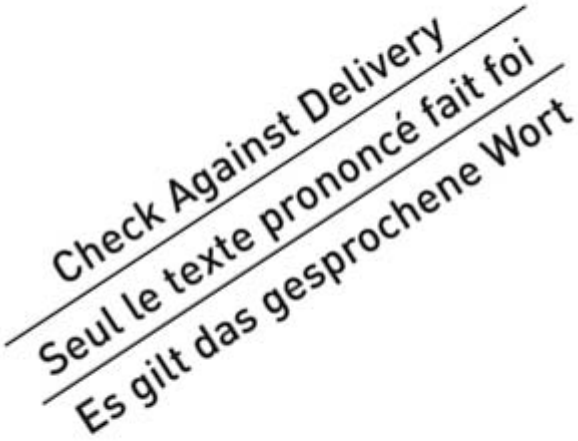
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Catherine Ashton
EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission

Statement by High Representative/Vice President Catherine Ashton on the situation in Syria



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Mr President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

After 18 months of fighting some 25,000 people have died in Syria's conflict while many more have been injured or made homeless. August has been the bloodiest month since the conflict began, and we have all recognised the appalling human rights violations and the destruction of the country's infrastructure and cultural heritage.

The situation in terms of humanitarian needs has worsened. We have over 230,000 refugees who have escaped into the neighbouring countries and 2.5 million inside Syria in need of assistance, of which 1.5 million are displaced. Still today, massacres continue and we see no end to the plight of so many innocent Syrians. I begin by saying to you that the humanitarian track is an absolute priority. We have to work closely with the neighbouring countries to coordinate and help with the massive challenge of refugees leaving as well as those who are displaced internally. Over these past two or three days I've spoken yet again with the Foreign Ministers of Turkey and Jordan and I've met with the Prime Minister of Lebanon to talk about the challenges that they face and to try to offer additional support.

Turkey is doing what I think is a very impressive job in hosting the refugees, but they are flowing in greater numbers and that is becoming a big difficulty. As the Foreign Minister said to me, it takes one month to build a camp properly, but of course only a very short time to fill it. Refugees, particularly those in Jordan and Lebanon, are being hosted outside camps, in families and schools, and it's having a greater impact on services, with a real need for increased support.

As you've seen over the weekend, Commissioner Georgieva has announced an additional €50 million of humanitarian funding and that puts the Commission's total contribution at €168 million, with a total EU contribution of about €240 million. It is also really important, as well as providing the resources – a lot of which are going to NGOs providing support on the ground – that we have assisted the Syrian Humanitarian forum, which exists under the leadership of the United Nations, and that we are providing, through our Neighbourhood Policy instruments, support for civil society that remains within Syria or that has fled to neighbouring countries, to try to help them develop and to meet needs across the country.

As I have said, we have children who were supported in Jordan and in Lebanon through the UNHCR, by helping the capacity of institutions and local communities, working with about 300 schools to support children who are now coming in and who need schooling. And as I have said many times before, we should never underestimate the importance of school and education for children who have been traumatised by these terrible circumstances, to help them to have some sense of normality in their lives.

Of course we have suspended all our work with the Syrian government but we have stepped up assistance to human rights organisations in the field of activists, networking and advocacy. A number of our contracts in Syria are still in place, so we are preparing additional funds in order to be able to support humanitarian relief and through education, food, water, support for people and support for them organisationally.

You will be the first to say to me that this is not going to end the crisis. We face a dangerous stalemate. With each side seeming convinced that war may turn to their advantage there could be more violence and more suffering and the most radical elements on all sides will become stronger, bringing further militarisation and the risk of sectarian violence. We are also very aware of the threat from the presence of chemical weapons, which is being monitored very closely.

The truth is that, despite all the efforts, the international community is in a sense at a deadlock, the six point plan has not been implemented, and the UN Security Council has not been able to agree on a common response that could open the way for a political solution.

And the opposition, in spite of some real progress that we felt was being made in Cairo at the beginning of July under the supervision of the Arab League, remains fragmented. We don't yet have a real alternative to the regime in power, an alternative that is truly inclusive, something that I know honourable Members feel very strongly about.

It is obvious that the regime is so clearly responsible for the conflict and the parties have got to do everything to find a solution. But we also have a collective responsibility and we cannot wait. The Syrian people have waited for too long and this stalemate could drag on, which would have impact not only on the terrible things happening in Syria now but beyond into the region.

So the priority we have to have beyond continuing to provide humanitarian aid and support, increasing it, working with Member States, working with the international Red Cross/Red Crescent, working with those who have been providing support through the UN, is to find a way to reduce and stop the violence and the killing.

We have to do everything we possibly can to find ways to promote a political transition. And we have to be ready for the post-conflict moment and the period of transition towards what we want to see, which is, of course, democracy. Our approach, in a sense, must change; we have to make real progress on this.

I raised all this with the Foreign Ministers at the Gymnich at the weekend. It is clear of course that we are absolutely united in that Assad has to go and that we need to see this political transition move forward.

We agree that while the humanitarian track is an absolute priority and we consistently urge the regime and the opposition groups to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, we have to continue to work on a number of different tracks: political, diplomatic, support for the opposition groups to come together and a plan for the future.

On the political and diplomatic track, the EU ministers reaffirmed their support for Mr Lakhdar Brahimi as the UN-Arab League Joint Special Representative. I have offered him our expertise and our operational assistance in what is an extremely challenging task. He is working with the UNSC, with Syria's neighbouring countries, with the LAS and with us. I remind honourable Members that our Delegation remains open in Damascus and is ready to assist him and his team in any way they can.

I have made this offer very clear to him and he and I will meet for a long discussion at the General Assembly in New York where we have a meeting arranged. We will also be meeting with the Secretary General of the Arab League, together, in order to look at what we can do regionally.

We have to carry on urging a political solution and we have to find a way to make contact with those who are striving for a peaceful transition process. That means continuing our efforts towards outreach on the ground, through the people we have on the ground and all the contacts we have.

We have to bring the efforts together: without the support for Mr Brahimi it would be impossible for him to coordinate the multiple efforts and find tangible results. I say to the honourable Members that we did everything we could to support Mr Kofi Annan and what he sought to do, to try to work together with the Security Council in order to be able to come together. We need to continue our diplomatic efforts involving all the key partners.

I remain in regular touch with Russia, with China, with all of the neighbours of Syria, with all of the regional organisations. And of course with Ban ki Moon, with whom I talked about this a few days ago. I will meet again with all of them, as well as with Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary of State Clinton in ten days' time in New York. It is absolutely, of course, going to be the focus of the UN General Assembly, where I hope we will take the opportunity to really seriously discuss, and make some progress. I believe the Security Council has to work tirelessly to find common ground in support of Mr Brahimi. It is absolutely essential that he gets our full support and is able to work in Syria and develop the mission.

One of the issues I have already touched upon is the need to ensure that we work to support the opposition. I've said that we need to find ways of bringing them together and to help and support them to be able to find a transitional government. And that means bringing all of the on-going efforts to do this together so that there is a common approach and a general move forward in this direction.

So we have the humanitarian support, which needs to increase and to be tangible, to reach people. We have the support for Mr Brahimi in the efforts he is making to try to find a political solution, with the support of everyone, so that the United Nations works together to find common ground to push forward on this. And that we work with the opposition groups both in and outside of Syria, to find a common ground to bring forward a transitional government in waiting and push forward in support of the people.

We have facilitated of course a dialogue with the opposition groups and we have asked them again to set aside their differences and to agree on a shared platform of principles. Particularly where we can see that they can work together in support of the people of Syria, building on our approach towards human rights, to ensure that all are included, regardless of faith or gender or origin.

We have also got to keep up the economic pressure: we have had 17 rounds of sanctions and we discussed at the weekend the need to see what more we can do, and to make sure that the sanctions are as effective as possible. We have agreed now to see without delay what more can be done.

As honourable Members will be aware, accountability for the crimes that have taken place requires our full attention. These atrocities cannot go unpunished and we have been prominent in calling for a strong response to the-systematic and widespread violations of human rights, to combat impunity and hold accountable those responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Syria.

Through the current Human Rights Council session we will push this forward. We have proposed to provide support to enhance accountability efforts to the Independent Commission of Inquiry, which we want to see extended, and other UN relevant bodies and mechanisms.

It is of course incredibly difficult to predict the end of this crisis. We have started planning for the transition, preparing a set of actions at EU level in which we can add value starting from day one and to coordinate that with our Member States and international organisations.

That means ensuring that we have the capacity to increase our presence inside Syria as soon as the situation allows. It means leading on and working towards effective donor coordination, and starting preparations for a rapid post-conflict needs assessment. All these things, honourable Members, need to be done and are being done, now. It means setting aside the funds that we are going to need to be able to do this. Because as well as the additional support for humanitarian aid, we have to be able to support the people and to support the transition that is going to be moving forward.

All I can say to end is that we have to begin with the principles that we hold dear. The future ofSyria belongs to the Syrian people. We have to help them in every possible way that we can. We have engaged in every aspect of trying to find solutions; diplomatic; political; working with Member States to ensure that we are absolutely determined in supporting the efforts of the Security Council, the efforts to bring a common position that would enable the United Nations to move forward. And efforts to see what can be done to support the countries who are, as we speak, dealing with the impact in every possible way. And in doing so, to be able to put the resources behind the words and actually try to help find a solution for the people of Syria.