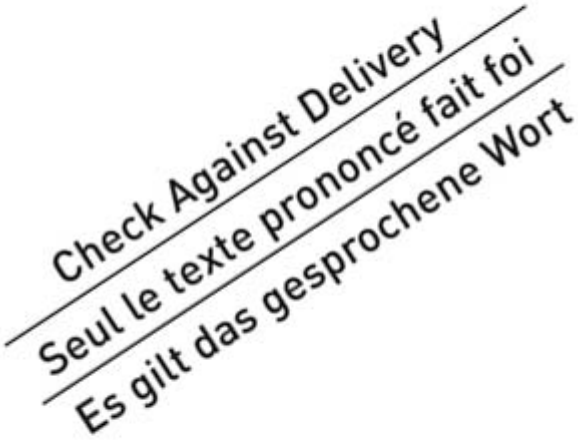
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Kristalina Georgieva
European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response

Humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis



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The situation in Syria today

When I took up the position of Commissioner almost three years ago, learning about the constraints of humanitarian aid and crisis response to get the European Parliament's approval, I anticipated that it would sometimes be testing to come after major disasters and try to help people who had lost everything.

Time and again, in Haiti, Pakistan, the Horn of Africa, or the Sahel, we have struggled to overcome the severe constraints that failed or failing States place on the delivery of humanitarian aid. And in Syria, we face an even more complex situation where the political impasse is producing an escalating humanitarian catastrophe that is causing tremendous suffering to millions of Syrians and having destabilizing consequences for the entire region.

Just a quick reminder: over 30,000 people have lost their lives inside Syria. More than 2.5 m people are in need of immediate assistance. Including at least 1.2 m internally displaced. Refugee numbers have gone up rapidly – 382,000 in the UNHCR database. What is important to realize here is that these numbers, which grew steadily until last summer, are now growing much faster.

When I visited the Kilis Camp in Turkey last June, it had taken 5 months to reach 20,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey, then another month to reach 30,000. Now, 4 months later, we are at 110,000 registered refugees in Turkey. And UNHCR thinks that refugee numbers might go up to 700,000 for the entire region by the end of the year.

And with winter creeping up on people fast and no end of fighting in sight, things will get much worse. In December and January, temperatures move towards freezing point in certain areas. There is an urgent need to deliver sheeting, blankets, stoves, heating fuel, and winter clothes.

The EU response

So, a dramatic situation which is likely to get worse. What is Europe doing?

First, a quick recap of what we have done so far:

In terms of funding for the relief effort – both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries: the EU is at the moment the biggest donor to the crisis. €119m from the European Commission; and close to €250m if you add up the efforts of all EU Member States in addition to €96m from ECHO.

We have made sure that others – such as the European Neighbourhood Instrument or the Stability Instrument – provide complementary funding, in particular in neighbouring countries, which are receiving a significant part of the EU funding.

Where has that money gone? To emergency health care, food assistance, livelihood support, logistics, water and sanitation. All of this implemented by the Red Cross, by UN organizations like the World Food Programme and the High Commissioner for Refugees, and by NGOs.

We have also on two occasions helped mobilize 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 .

mobilise these different instruments, we are coordinating closely with HR/VP Ashton and Commissioner Fule and Malmstrom in order to make sure that financing from Humanitarian Aid is for life-saving activities and European Neighbourhood and other instruments for accompanying measures.

We have also worked very hard to mobilize the international community, which is sometimes very frustrating in such a politicized environment. We have so far co-facilitated, with the UN, 5 meetings of the Syria Humanitarian Forum – where all the key actors (UN, NGOs, UN member states) got together to try and agree on some basic humanitarian action points. That is not an easy process – but we have found it worthwhile and we are preparing the next forum, which will take place on 9 November.

On 26 September, I co-hosted, with Jordan, a meeting at the UN General Assembly in New York on the humanitarian situation in Syria – with key donor countries, but also with countries neighbouring Syria , and with Russia and China . We had a very constructive discussion – and we all actually agreed on the need to protect humanitarian workers, and to keep humanitarian aid separate from any political process.

We have also been holding weekly coordination meetings with our humanitarian aid partners, to see where are the greatest needs, to share information about deliveries and to make sure we are all on the same page.

One point has been very clear to me in all these efforts: in order to make even limited progress on the delivery of humanitarian aid, we need to keep it free from political considerations. In the face of reports showing the Government's air or artillery attacks on Syrian cities, it is tempting to focus assistance on a particular party, but this does not help the genuine humanitarians working inside Syria – and there is a very significant number of humanitarian workers operating inside Syria today. If they are not perceived as genuine humanitarians, they will be even more at risk as they are today. Let's remember13 humanitarian works who died in Syria so far, and many more have been wounded.

If we were perceived as playing political games with our humanitarian aid – we would just find ourselves being expelled by one side or the other, and unable to deliver aid. That has been a basic principle for humanitarians ever since Henri Dunant created the Red Cross – but few crises illustrate this very practical point as clearly as Syria.

Is assistance getting through?

So a lot is happening – but the crucial question is of course: is assistance reaching everyone who needs it? And what about people who are in areas not controlled by the government? Or in areas that are actively being fought over?

Our partners are clear: assistance is getting through to both government-controlled and rebel-controlled or disputed areas. Since the beginning of September, roughly half of food assistance has gone to disputed or rebel-controlled areas – and roughly half to government-controlled areas. We have gone from a situation in which only the International Committee of the Red Cross (and the Syrian Red Crescent) were allowed to work inside Syria, to a situation where the UN and 8 international NGOs, in addition to 90 local organizations, have been drawn into the relief effort [see the map we have distributed].

Three major Concerns

Still, this is far from sufficient. As many have you have pointed it out, humanitarians do not have sufficient access. Getting in and delivering medical assistance remains a huge challenge. Medical facilities and personnel are targeted, doctors and nurses are in short supply, and UNICEF is struggling to restart immunization programmes. Beside access, our second concern is about International Humanitarian Law. This is an obligation on all parties to the conflict. This is easily forgotten and therefore constantly recalled by the EU Foreign Affairs Council.

Our third main concern is about global funding for the Syrian crisis. Although everyone agrees that more should be done for the Syrian People, the UN appeal is only funded to the tune of 50%. Some countries are reluctant to provide humanitarian aid that involves the Syrian government because it may taint the whole delivery of assistance and strengthen Assad's hand. And this is why I am always asking for more reporting from EU-funded partners, and I will continue to explain what is being done in and around Syria.

Let me conclude with what I said at the beginning. Only politics can resolve the situation in Syria. But in the absence of a political solution, much of the burden falls on the humanitarians. I hope that the humanitarian imperative will remain centre-stage in discussions on Syria. And that both the resources required to help people, and the advocacy we need on IHL, will continue to get strong political backing.

Thank you very much.