Speech by State Secretary Emily Haber at the 9th Forum on Global Issues Compact at the Federal Foreign Office: “The humanitarian dilemma – the neutrality of humanitarian assistance in conflicts”

2012-03-01

State Secretary Emily Haber gave the following opening speech at the 9th Forum on Global Issues Compact on “The humanitarian dilemma – the neutrality of humanitarian assistance in conflicts” at the Federal Foreign Office on 1 March 2012

-- Translation of advance text --

Mr Kellenberger,

Mr Seiters.

Members of the German Bundestag,

Excellencies,

General,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I bid you a warm welcome to this 9th Forum on Global Issues Compact here at the Federal Foreign Office. I’d like to extend my special thanks to the co-organizers of our meeting, the International Department of Caritas

Germany

, the German Red Cross and Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe. We were happy to take up their proposal for this joint event.

The theme of this Forum couldn’t be more topical: the ongoing violence in

Syria

, the reports of casualties and the suffering of the Syrian people have forcefully brought home to us how vital effective humanitarian assistance is. The conflict in

also strikingly illustrates the limits of humanitarian assistance: when state players hamper access to assistance and violate the fundamental rules of international humanitarian law, it becomes either impossible or very difficult to save lives and put in place survival measures. Even worse, the safety of aid personnel is disregarded or deliberately jeopardized.

Providers of humanitarian assistance face similar challenges in other conflicts: in the Sudan, the Government has been denying international aid workers access to the South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions for weeks; in Somalia, the al-Shabab militia have expelled almost all relief organizations from the area under their control; in Afghanistan, relief organizations and their staff regularly face hindrances, attacks and acts of violence.

How can international humanitarian assistance nevertheless be continued for the benefit of those in need in crisis regions around the world? How can we put the United Nations motto “to stay and deliver” into practice? How can we as a government actively shape foreign policy and, at the same time, provide neutral humanitarian assistance? And how can we ensure the safety of humanitarian aid workers? These are some of the questions we’ll be discussing today during this Forum and, wherever possible, we should find answers.

The Federal Foreign Office believes it has a threefold role in humanitarian assistance: we are donor, partner and political player all in one. Let me explain.

As donor, we are responsible for the arrangement of the funds made available by the German Government for humanitarian assistance. When allocating these funds, we are guided by the internationally agreed Principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship. Firstly, this means that aid money has to be made available in ways that are needs-oriented, flexible and unbureaucratic. It also means supporting the lead role of the United Nations, for there is no alternative to the world organization when it comes to ensuring effective international coordination. Finally, it means respecting and fostering international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles – compassion, independence, impartiality and neutrality.

Neutrality does not refer to the donor’s political position but, rather, to the way in which assistance is provided. The donor country should neither give preferential treatment to one of the parties to a conflict nor take a stand on a conflict. There’s therefore a good reason why we – as opposed to our usual practice in the development cooperation sphere – cooperate with independent partners when implementing humanitarian assistance. There’s likewise a good reason why we don’t commission humanitarian projects but, rather, grant funding for measures initiated by relief organizations on the basis of their own mandate and on their own responsibility.

Which brings me to the second part of our humanitarian aid philosophy: partnership. Especially as the German Government doesn’t have its own humanitarian implementing

organization, indeed doesn’t want one, a partnership with humanitarian organizations founded on mutual trust is particularly important. Firstly, this is vital for quite practical reasons: in an emergency, decisions on the nature and magnitude of assistance have to be made within a few days or hours. This requires mutual trust which, in turn, can only be acquired through regular and open exchange.

However, trust and partnership are also essential for exchanging information, assessments and evaluations on conflicts where humanitarian assistance is required and which have politically sensitive aspects. We do that on a regular basis with our national partners in the Humanitarian Aid Coordinating Committee, which we hear time and again is unique in

Europe

. With our international partners, such as the ICRC or the United Nations, we exchange ideas periodically and on specific humanitarian crises in

Berlin

and

Geneva

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For example, two weeks ago representatives of key international relief organizations and donor countries met in the Federal Foreign Office at our initiative to discuss possible ways of ensuring better access to humanitarian relief in

Syria

. Naturally, this was a confidential and non-binding dialogue. However, it demonstrated – and indeed was the prerequisite for – mutual understanding between relief organizations operating in the field and political donors.

That brings me to the third element of our humanitarian philosophy. For also as a political player, we promote assistance which is based on humanitarian principles and geared to local needs. In concrete conflicts, this is done bilaterally in coordination with our

EU

partners or in the

UN

Security Council. Concrete examples of this are the persistent calls for aid agencies to be granted humanitarian access in the

Sudan

, our support for exemptions for humanitarian assistance to be allowed under the

UN

sanctions against

Somalia

and for the inclusion of humanitarian considerations in the formulation of mandates for peacekeeping missions.

However, we are always prepared to discuss and defend how neutral humanitarian assistance should be perceived and how we can ensure its acceptance. Within the

UN

, it's often the traditional "recipients" of humanitarian assistance who question principles we take for granted. Neutrality is often interpreted as support for opposition groups, independence as a violation of national sovereignty. We therefore regularly seek to clear up these misunderstandings and call for humanitarian principles to be included in the relevant resolutions of the

UN

General Assembly and the Security Council.

However, these arguments also illustrate that the logic behind humanitarian assistance has, indeed must have, limits. Only if providers of humanitarian aid stick to their core mandate can they provide convincing grounds for its acceptance. If they set themselves goals beyond saving lives and survival measures, then they move into the spheres of development, health and human rights policy – and the assistance they provide is no longer neutral.

Ladies and gentlemen, some of you have already debated these issues this morning during an expert discussion organized by our partners. In a moment, Johannes Luchner from the European Commission Humanitarian Office and Prof. Eberwein from the NGO VOICE will report on the outcome of the expert discussion, thus providing interesting input for this afternoon's discussion. I would like to thank you, the other speakers, as well as the chair for sharing with us today your view of this event's theme, your knowledge and experience.

My special thanks go to Jakob Kellenberger, one of the most renowned representatives of international humanitarian assistance, who will talk to us today. Mr Kellenberger, you were a speaker at the Forum on Global Issues five years ago and I’m delighted to have you here again today to contribute your vast experience and expertise to this important debate, which is taking place so close to the date of the 31st International Red Cross Conference, and to give our discussion a framework.

However, I don’t want to finish without expressing my thanks and recognition to all those men and women who work in and for humanitarian relief organizations and do so with great personal commitment, often at considerable risk. When discussing the conditions required for effective humanitarian aid, your safety is as important to us as the legitimate need for assistance of those suffering hardship.

I would like to thank you for your attention and wish you an afternoon full of fruitful discussions.

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