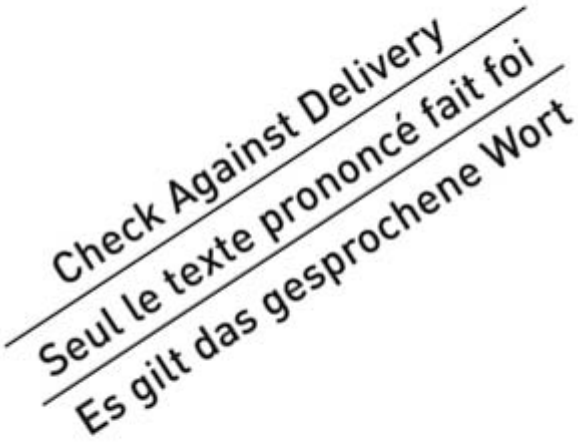
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Syria: Time is running out



Meeting with the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and the Committee on Development (DEVE) of the European Parliament / Brussels
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Let me first thank AFET, DEVE Committees and Elmar Brok for their timely invitation.

UN Humanitarian leaders have raised a strong voice on the critical situation in Syria at the UN Security Council of 18 April, which was followed by a strong press statement.

We all know the dreadful facts: 80,000 deaths and 6.5 Mio people in need of assistance in Syria. The resilience of Syrian people, who have helped so many refugees in the past be it Palestinians or Iraqis, has been exhausted by two years of conflict. To take only one example of their reduced capacity to help each other: in Aleppo, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world with 2.5 Mio inhabitants, there were 5,000 doctors before the start of the civil war. There are now 36 left.

Humanitarian aid is crucial. I would like to once again praise the humanitarian workers in Syria: close to 30 have lost their lives so far. We are increasing assistance, but the intensification of fighting means that needs on the ground grows much faster than the capacity to help: the gap is growing and it is likely to continue growing because of the current trends:

- few months ago, there were 2 Mio internally displaced persons. We are now at 4.25 Mio people. To give a comparison, the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia led to 2 Mio IDPs altogether;
- on 1 March, we had just crossed the 1 million refugees. Yesterday, I was in the Foreign Affairs Council and mentioned that there were 1,370,244 refugees. Today, I checked the HCR data: 1,381,481. In other words: 11,000 new refugees in 36 hours, 381,481 new refugees in 54 days. On the current trend, we should expect to have 3.5 Mio refugees. There were 700,000 refugees at the peak of the ex-Yugoslavia war.

The crisis in Syria is the one with the most dramatic spill-over risks that exists today and could have dramatic consequences for the region, and, therefore, Europe.

Once we have the virus of inter-community violence spreading, what could the consequences be? Countries in the neighbourhood in flames, and a humanitarian catastrophe of unimaginable proportions in a region that is close to our shores? So it is a tremendously important moral issue to help inside Syria and support the countries hosting refugees, but it is also in European self-interest to do so.

In the current circumstances, I am convinced that now is the right moment for a new drive to help the Syrian people, the refugees and the strained neighbouring States. I call for three actions where EU leadership can make a difference.

First, we must put pressure to open up more space for humanitarian workers. Our most basic humanitarian principles of access to and protection of victims are being trampled upon and violated on a daily basis. Hospitals, bakeries, aid convoys and medical personnel are being targeted. Rape is becoming widespread - a weapon of war.

In the year we are celebrating the Red Cross' s 150th anniversary its values are receding to a pinpoint on the horizon. Our aid is becoming polluted by politics. The purpose of humanitarian aid is not to confer any advantage to one side against an other – we are not "with you or against you". It is about providing assistance to all civilian victims without discrimination. Humanitarian aid is a lifeline: it should not be defined by front-lines.

Even if the battle stops tomorrow, the wounds will remain – and they will remain for longer if they are deeper. We can do more to have less violations of humanitarian law. Our humanitarian interlocutors have confirmed that both the Assad regime and the rebels respond to pressure on the humanitarian situation.

So we must build on the UNSC recent press statement that condemns International Humanitarian Law violations and ask all parties to allow the humanitarians workers to do their job. This is the strongest wording used so far and it is a step in the right direction. But we need to bring this to the next level and make it a UNSC Resolution in defence of the Syrian people and of the people helping them on the ground.

Second, we have to provide more resources to people inside Syria. Europe has already provided more than 470 million euros in humanitarian funding and I am confident that this will rise to over 600 million euros once all the pledges made in January at the Kuwait donor conference are fulfilled. The European Commission has honoured its commitments in full but it is shameful that of the 1.5 billion dollars pledged in Kuwait less than half has been delivered to the UN aid agencies. Kuwait has just handed in its check to the UN, we have to pressure others to do the same. As a matter of urgency, I call on all Member States to deliver on their financial promises.

We are on good footing to ask others to do more. We will be on an even better footing if we ensure that the modification of the EU sanctions regime decided yesterday at the FAC benefit the Syrian people and alleviate their suffering. Providing oil revenues to people will be complicated but it can improve the situation of ordinary Syrians if it is allocated in priority for humanitarian needs.

Third, in view of the spill-over risks, we have to come with a comprehensive package of measures to help the Syrian refugees and support their host countries. I have relayed to HR/VP Cathy Ashton and Commissioner Stefan Fule what we, humanitarians, see on the ground: the signs of rejection of the refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the very real risks of an enormous tragedy should the borders be closed indefinitely.

Under the leadership of Cathy and Stefan, we are mapping out all the EU tools and instruments that go beyond humanitarian assistance to support these countries.

We are looking at humanitarian life-saving activities, community and municipal services and macro-economic stabilisation. For these categories of support, we will need to show flexibility in our financial instruments and the European Parliament contribution in this regard will be crucial.

All, collectively, we have the moral imperative to do help alleviate people's suffering on the humanitarian front. This is essential inside Syria and in the region. We must act now, proactively, before it is too late, to assist neighbouring countries which are bearing the strain of refugees, especially Jordan and Lebanon.

Let me end with one thought: how many Europeans had to die in order for Europe to adopt international humanitarian laws and will we allow to let them evaporate?