European Commission - Speech

Opening remarks by Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi at The Syrian refugee crisis – Delivering in partnership'

16 December 2019

Geneva, 16 December 2019

Excellencies, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished guests,

I am honoured to open this panel on 'The Syrian refugee crisis - Delivering in partnership' at this first meeting of the Global Refugee Forum, and to share the floor with my distinguished co-panellists.

The conflict in Syria is a particularly tragic and complex one, and the new, geopolitical European Commission is addressing it as a priority.

The conflict has forced more than 6 million people to leave their homes within Syria and more than 5 million to flee their country: more than 11 million lives have been disrupted. The impact of the crisis on Syria is devastating, and it reaches far beyond Syrian borders.

I particularly commend the efforts of the neighbouring countries, including Jordan and Turkey present on this panel, and Lebanon in hosting refugees.

The impact of the crisis has marked the lives not only of the refugees and displaced, but also of all those hosting refugees, as natural resources, social services, school places and jobs are not endless.

This is all the more obvious as the violence in the country continues and the crisis has become protracted in nature.

The European Union has been at the forefront of the international response. Together with its Member States, the European Union has been the largest donor and mobilised more than €17 billion since 2011, to help those who have fled the war, both within and outside Syria, and the host communities in which they are displaced.

Necessity is the mother of invention and the European Union has used innovative ways to be able to respond to the needs that have been and remain unprecedented:

The EU's Facility for Refugees in Turkey and the EU Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, Madad, are examples of how the EU has adapted, responded and maximised resources, channelling funds efficiently to address the impact of the crisis.

In Turkey, the entire financial envelope of €6 billion of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey has now been allocated to support integration of refugees until a more durable solution is found for their displacement.

We will soon reach €2 billion of funds mobilised via the EU Trust Fund Madad - supporting in particular Lebanon and Jordan, but also Iraq.

We have established new ways of working together. In the partnerships with civil society and implementing partners. And in the EU using its convening power to bring the international community together. The Brussels conferences of 2017, 2018 and 2019 were clear in their political intent.

Over time, needs have become more complex and our support has adapted in view of the needs.

First, the need for hope. Hope for the future and a future for the next generation. Education is crucial. The EU is working closely together with our partner countries to increase the capacities of their education systems to be able to welcome the children from Syria, along with their Lebanese, Jordan or Turkish peers.

Second, the need to help people live in dignity. Lack of economic opportunity perpetuates the burden for all. Those whose livelihoods have been destroyed must have the opportunity to provide for

themselves and their families.

The question of how long the crisis in Syria will continue is uppermost in our minds. We certainly want a see a negotiated political solution, as defined in the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and 2012 Geneva Communique. We support the work of the UN Special Envoy and the UN-led Geneva process in this regard and believe that the start of the work of the Constitutional Committee represents an important step in the right direction.

We must under all circumstances work for an end to the refugee crisis. The European Union does not oppose returns. Rather, we look forward to the moment when UNHCR can confirm that conditions are in place for safe, dignified and voluntary returns and that a system of monitoring can ensure returnees are secure.

That is not yet the case and, until it is, we will need to continue our support.

Ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, we can only face the challenges ahead of us if we work together closely – EU, UN system, hosting countries, civil society, communities, individuals. It is in our common interest to promote stability and prosperity across the region, a peaceful and sustainable solution to the conflict in Syria. It is in our common interest to put in place the internationally recognised conditions for refugees to return.

Thank you for your attention!

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