European Commission - Speech

Opening remarks by President von der Leyen at the International Donors' Conference 'Together for the people in Türkiye and Syria'

Brussels, 20 March 2023

Dear Prime Minister Kristersson,

Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for joining us today. When the earth started to shake in Türkiye and Syria, it was cold, it was dark and raining. People were sleeping in the warmth of their homes when the sky came crashing down. The pain of the loss of life is inexpressible. More than 48,000 people dead, thousands still missing, millions homeless. In minutes, cities and communities were turned to mounds of rubble and dust. Entire families were lost. Their beds turned into coffins.

When the sun rose that morning, the people of Türkiye and Syria were in shock and mourning. The whole world held its breath. But tens of thousands sprang to action to rescue and save those who were still alive beneath the devastation; to heal and to give shelter to those who lost everything. Thousands volunteered, working day and night in the dust and in the cold, saving hundreds of lives, screaming of joy whenever they found a child alive under the rubble. The first responders performed miracles, in the midst of tragedy. They inspired hope where there is so much pain. This is a story of catastrophic loss. And it is a story of heroic solidarity among the people of Türkiye, the people of Syria and your friends around the world.

On that morning, many rushed to help. The European Union too immediately activated its Civil Protection Mechanism. Hours after the first earthquake, European rescue teams arrived in Türkiye, just as a second earthquake, almost as powerful as the first, caused even more death. 1,652 European rescuers and 111 search dogs helped the local heroes. Hungarian firefighters, for example, found Selma, a Turkish woman, five metres beneath a collapsed building where she lay for 47 hours. It was in the middle of the night when they heard her cries, with -9 degrees Celsius outside. They got her out alive, and Selma's story of survival is one of so many. Polish and Bulgarian teams found and saved an entire family of four. And the first survivor a French medical team treated was a three-month pregnant Syrian refugee. For over ten days, they searched the rubble. At Gaziantep airport, there were rescue and medical teams from all over the world. Many were crying. They were exhausted. They had not slept for days. I think we owe them an overwhelming gratitude.

Today's impressive attendance at this Donors' Conference testifies to the international community's strong response. The whole world mobilised to support the people of Türkiye and Syria. Because the scale of this tragedy is so large that no country or agency alone could have done anywhere near what we have done together.

Six weeks later, the scale of the devastation from the earthquakes is still being uncovered. And the international mobilisation has not stopped. Tents and clothes and food and medical supplies continue to arrive. Yet the needs of the survivors are still massive and must be tackled with urgency. The earthquakes affected a region in Türkiye home to 13.5 million people, and an unknown number in Syria. Millions are now homeless and living in tents as the winter drags on. We need to sustain our support and help the survivors not just to survive but to rebuild their lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to mobilise for reconstruction. Homes and schools and hospitals must be rebuilt with the highest standards of seismic safety. Water and sanitation and other critical infrastructure must be repaired. Public services and businesses need capital to restart so that people can earn a living. We will hear later from the UNDP a presentation of the first estimates of damages. But we already know that the challenge is immense, larger than anyone of us alone can master, but together we can master the challenge.

That is why, together with the Turkish authorities and the Swedish Presidency of the Council, the European Commission has organised this pledging conference. No one can fill the void left by those who lost their lives. Yet together we can reconstruct and rebuild. The European Union, its Member States and financial institutions have put together a strong pledge. I am pleased to announce that the European Commission alone will support Türkiye with EUR 1 billion for the post-earthquake reconstruction. We also pledge a further package of EUR 108 million for humanitarian assistance and early recovery in Syria.

On the top of this, our Member States and the European financial institutions will make additional pledges. That comes on top of the EUR 21 million in humanitarian assistance that we have already mobilised. So I invite all nations and all donors to contribute, to honour the memory of the lives lost, to honour the heroism of the first responders and to sustain the hope of the survivors.

Thank you very much.

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International Donors' Conference

Together for the people in Türkiye and Syria