

Closing Speech
by Commissioner Christos Stylianides
Annual Conference of the European Commission
Humanitarian Aid Partners
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Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I am here today, with you, at the closing session of the annual conference. This is, of course, the first time we meet since I was appointed Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management. Many more meetings will certainly follow. This is my promise to you.

My intention is to establish an open channel of communication with you. Our strong network of humanitarian aid partners. Because I truly believe that our working partnership is the cornerstone of the European response to humanitarian crises.

Yesterday was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. We know that gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse increase during and in the aftermath of emergencies. I am proud that ECHO initiated last year a gender-age policy to address precisely this issue.

We all know that the challenges ahead are huge. **But so is my commitment and determination. I am sure yours as**

well. After all, effective humanitarian response requires collective responsibility and collective action. **It is not a one man operation.** We are all together in the difficult job to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

Let me start by thanking you all for the remarkable work you are doing. **We deeply appreciate** the wealth of expertise that you bring. And your drive for quality and cost-effectiveness.

Let me pay tribute to you for delivering essential humanitarian assistance in increasingly challenging contexts. In the line of duty the lives of your humanitarian workers are, sometimes, lost.

The news from around the globe is a painful reminder of the growing dangers facing humanitarian aid workers. We all deeply honour humanitarian workers such as David Haines, Alan Henning and Peter Kassig who were murdered by ISIL militants. I am also thinking of the sixteen courageous aid workers murdered in the Central African Republic since last December. These are just few tragic examples among many others.

Unfortunately, the shrinking of the humanitarian space comes at a time of growing needs. Needs that have not been matched by adequate funding. I am aware of the difficulties stemming from the recent financial shortfall. I know that this issue was presented in depth by Claus yesterday.

I am very grateful for the efforts, that all of you have put in order to convince the decision-makers to allocate sufficient funding for Humanitarian aid. I want to assure you that we are doing all we can, to ensure that the funding deficit is absorbed sooner rather than later. And this, despite the difficult discussions by the budgetary authorities. We are confident, that, particularly in the future, **payments will equal commitments**.

Let me be clear: the disruption to humanitarian aid activities is not an option. I am certain that Vice-President Kristalina Georgieva, responsible for budgetary matters, and with a very profound knowledge and sensitivity about the uniqueness of humanitarian aid, will succeed in advocating an adequate humanitarian budget for the years to come.

Our partnership is valuable and is based on principles. Our partnership is unique by its size among other donors. **It is our obligation to safeguard it. To shield it.** And, of course, to enhance it. This conference is only one example of the quality dialogue that our partnership has allowed us to develop. A dialogue we must continue to have.

As this conference is coming to an end, I sincerely hope that it was as useful for you as it was for us. I know of the rich and constructive discussion you had on the World Humanitarian Summit. Also about the importance for ECHO partners to put evidence on the table on the need to work better together. On the need for changes.

Let me take today's opportunity to recall briefly my main priorities as Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, as I did before the European Parliament during my hearing.

First, the uninterrupted continuation of essential assistance to people in need. **Our purpose is to make a difference**, alleviate suffering and bring back hope to the most vulnerable. **The EU must not arrive with too little, too late.** Our solidarity must be strong and tangible.

Second, to defend the uniqueness and principles of humanitarian aid. I will do all I can to ensure that humanitarian aid is not instrumentalised. That the tested principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence are fully respected. This is the core of the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. This is the precondition that allows you to negotiate safe access to the victims.

Third, we are “in but out”. ‘In’ because we are at the table to assess the situation, to ring the alert bell and to raise political awareness. But we are also ‘out’ because humanitarian aid is needs-based and grounded in humanitarian principles. **My purpose is to bring your concerns, your ideas, your proposals on the negotiating table.** Our principle is clear: **humanitarian aid is based on needs. Not on political expediency.**

Fourth, prevention is better than cure. Resilience remains our focus. Investing on resilience today through

humanitarian and development assistance is much more cost effective than responding to a crisis tomorrow.

Fifth, step up cooperation at EU level in the field of civil protection. To reinforce the synergies between civil protection and humanitarian aid. The implementation of the New Civil Protection Legislation reinforces our capacity to respond, combined with an increased focus on disaster prevention and preparedness. We have launched the 'Voluntary Pool' of Member States' assets on standby for European operations. We will also strengthen further the Emergency Response Coordination Centre, linking up with Member States, humanitarian donors, and you, our partners, **to push for a really 'joined up' approach.**

We all agree that 2014 is a year that will be remembered for the unprecedented level of crises. Humanitarian disasters that continue to require our immediate and full attention. This year we have witnessed four simultaneous level-three crises: Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic and South Sudan. In addition to that is the deadly Ebola epidemic in West Africa.

At the same time, there are many protracted crises that deserve sustained humanitarian assistance: Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Colombia, and Myanmar, to name only a few.

The shocking figures speak for themselves. For the first time since World War Two, the number of forcibly displaced people exceeded fifty million. For example, as a result of

the Syria crisis, 9.6 million people have been forced to leave their homes.

This unparalleled situation is placing a huge pressure on the international humanitarian system. I hope that the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 will be a major step forward in improving the capacity of the international humanitarian system to serve people in need.

I look forward to the Summit which will take place in Istanbul. It has both a symbolic and substantive significance. The Summit presents an opportunity to improve the functions of the humanitarian system. To make this system more efficient and effective. In 2015, in light of the Summit, I intend to mobilize all actors involved in order to formulate EU proposals. Our dialogue will greatly contribute to this.

Moreover, the fact that the Summit will take place in Istanbul is an opportunity to build bridges of understanding of a common heritage. A heritage based on impartial assistance to the most vulnerable, women and children and those exiled from home.

Nobody expects that the number of crises will go down in the coming years. Conflicts continue to challenge international and regional stability. Natural disasters are more frequent as a result, among other things, of climate change. The world has become more fragile. The EU is not spared from such natural disasters.

Fortunately, we have developed strong preparedness tools. When the scale of an emergency overwhelms national

response capabilities, any country in the world can, for example, call upon the Union Civil Protection Mechanism. The Emergency Response Coordination Centre is ready, at any time, to facilitate, support and coordinate the deployment of in-kind assistance from the Participating States of the Mechanism. This alone reflects the growing role of the ERCC, which is gradually becoming the Commission's main crisis coordination platform.

Time has come to shift our approach in dealing with today's complex risks and to focus on implementation and delivering results. The EU is determined to continue playing an active role in the international response within the Hyogo Framework. We are ready to engage in an open and constructive dialogue with all partners and stakeholders at the upcoming World conference in Sendai next March.

Let me close with some reflections on my recent mission to Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. The three countries most affected by Ebola.

It was an overwhelming experience. We saw first-hand, on the ground, the problems and the needs. We felt the gravity of the situation. One of our main conclusions is that the recovery process will be difficult and it will take time. That is why the EU's commitment should remain strong and long term.

The epidemic has evolved in different ways in the three-affected countries, as has the response of the international community. Nevertheless, all three of them share common

features. In the coming weeks we must focus our work on four pillars:

- First, mobilise much needed medical personnel and strengthen the Medevac system. We need epidemiologists and large numbers of people to work on contact tracing, and to reach out to local communities.
- Second, to start rebuilding the health systems of the affected countries. As the EU Ebola Coordinator this is one of my major priorities.
- Third, to push for the development of a vaccine. The EU as a whole is supporting new research strongly.
- Finally, to encourage closer cooperation between the countries of the region on Ebola. There is a need for regional cooperation! The crisis offers an opportunity. For a new beginning of cooperation and dialogue for the region as a whole.

During the mission I met local and international health workers. The work they are doing is simply remarkable. **They are the real heroes of the battle against Ebola.** People do not often realize how important it is for these persons to feel that they are not stigmatized by their communities when they return back from the affected region.

Moreover, I met with Ebola survivors. Their personal stories are really shocking. In their eyes you could see, at the same time, their joy for being alive and their pain for being

stigmatized and marginalized by members of their families and communities. Many of them are now volunteering to help save the lives of others. **They need our long term support.**

In these challenging times we must all play our part. **Not alone. But in coordination. As a team.** I have no doubt that your commitment is strong. That you will continue playing your role. With the same determination. Keep up the good work. On my part, I want to reassure you that I will be with you at the frontline of the effort to meet the needs and mitigate the human suffering.

Once again, thank you very much for your partnership and outstanding work.