

Thank you Madam Chair, Honourable Members,

It is a pleasure for me to be here today to discuss with you the Slovak Presidency priorities in the field of humanitarian aid.

I appreciate the work of the European Parliament and this Committee in particular in the area of humanitarian assistance.

Before turning to the presentation of our programme, allow me to thank the Dutch colleagues and you, honourable members of this Committee, for ensuring a smooth and cooperative transition to our presidency.

As Minister Ploumen mentioned in her address at the beginning of the Dutch presidency, big changes require significant time and therefore it is not possible to achieve all that is necessary in the 6 months presidency period. Therefore, we will strive to continue in the progress that was initiated under previous presidencies and I am convinced that the foreign minister of Malta sitting over here shares this approach.

We can all agree that the humanitarian situation in the world is dire. In the last decade, the EU has been at the forefront in both humanitarian funding and the development of new and more effective humanitarian instruments. During the same period, as you are all aware, the number of people adversely affected by humanitarian crises has almost doubled. The conflict in Syria alone has triggered the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. We are facing the situation where more than 76 million people from 31 countries are in need of humanitarian assistance. The number of people displaced by conflict exceeded 51 million. As of today, there are still 4 countries qualified as Level 3 emergencies: Syria, Iraq, Yemen and South Sudan. These figures show how very different the situation is today compared to the year 2004, when Slovakia started to provide development cooperation and humanitarian aid as a fresh EU Member. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to seize the momentum created by the World Humanitarian Summit in May and make the humanitarian system as it stands now more efficient, predictable and flexible. Together, we have to make it fit for purpose.

It is clear that despite increasing donor contributions, it is impossible to keep up the rapidly growing humanitarian needs.

Regardless its crucial importance, humanitarian aid alone cannot adequately address or sustainably reduce the growing needs of the most vulnerable people. A more coherent approach is required – one that will focus on:

- addressing the root causes, that cause massive flows of refugees and IDPs
- preventing and ending conflicts through political leadership and
- bridging the gap between humanitarian and development efforts.

In light of these realities, we have decided to focus on three key and four specific priorities during our presidency. Now, I will address our three main areas of focus.

The first priority of the Slovak Presidency is an improved and coordinated humanitarian response to crises. We will focus on identifying ways to improve the humanitarian response through coherent and coordinated action by the Member States and the Commission. Increased attention needs to be paid to all the Level 3 emergencies. We are also committed to bring forgotten crises, which are slipping off the radar, back to the humanitarian agenda. With a view to the current migration crisis, the Slovak Presidency will regard as one of its priority areas also forced displacement and the humanitarian situation of refugees, IDPs, as well as their host communities in countries outside the EU.

Additionally, I would like to emphasize that grounding humanitarian action in local capacities, resources and local context is crucial. Localization has the advantage of being less costly by avoiding multiple layers of aid delivery but also being sustainable in the long term and accountable to aid recipients. When talking about humanitarian effectiveness, the primary role of national and local authorities of affected countries needs to be recognized. National and local responders are more likely to work within existing infrastructure and markets, which can improve the sustainability of response efforts.

The second key task on our humanitarian agenda is to follow up on the results of the first ever World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul where many of you participated. The EU and its Member States, we, collectively committed ourselves to more than 600 commitments towards more efficient and effective national or international humanitarian system.

I had the honour to attend this event as a member of the delegation of my President and I would like to commend the multi-stakeholder approach and three dimensions of this event:

- political in terms of harnessing global support which was one of the biggest achievements of the summit,
- practical focused on the improvements on the ground in order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian aid provision,
- and also its awareness raising nature which galvanized the attention of the international community.

The Summit has lent support to many of the reforms within the humanitarian system that the EU – including the European Parliament – advocated for, particularly when it comes to financing and education.

It also underlined what we stress in our first key priority: that humanitarian assistance cannot be an indefinite substitute for political solutions. We must tackle the root causes of conflict and address comprehensively the humanitarian situations around the world. This requires linking relief efforts with

other areas such as security and development. Here, the Summit has not delivered a definitive consensus and we hope we can make progress in this regard during our Presidency, in line with our specific focus.

In this regard, the Slovak Presidency will follow closely the upcoming *UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants* as well as *Leaders' Summit* and will facilitate the discussion among member states to contribute to sustainable solutions to migration challenges. EU should speak clearly and with one strong voice in these fora.

In addition, we also wish to emphasise the need of adhering to international humanitarian law, securing humanitarian access to crisis zones as well as protecting aid and medical personnel on the ground.

As my President stressed in Istanbul, the protection of the humanitarian workers is crucial. His call on all governments and states to respect work and lives of humanitarian workers came just three days after the tragic death of Veronika Racková, Slovak medical doctor and humanitarian worker, who was shot in South Sudan while driving an ambulance after taking an expectant mother to the hospital. We feel concerned by the renewed violence in South Sudan over the past weekend which is but a tragic reminder of the volatile nature of the humanitarian crisis.

We recognise that the summit is not an end in itself. Quite the opposite - an ambitious follow-up is needed in order to walk the talk. We need to build on the generated political momentum to move swiftly towards the implementation of our collective commitments. Slovakia supports all core commitments.

In addition, as announced in Istanbul – as from the next year we will double our finances on humanitarian assistance. More private commercial donations are to be encouraged and our national system of humanitarian assistance will be re-build to become much more efficient.

Third, our priority is to promote the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, as it is the policy cornerstone of the EU and its Member States in this area. We together with the Commission and other trio countries are part of the Task Force for the implementation of the second action plan of the Consensus. We will strive to play an active role in improving coherence, effectiveness and quality of the humanitarian assistance by supporting the fulfilment of the second Consensus Implementation Plan.

Honourable Members, as I mentioned in the beginning, apart from our three main areas of focus, we have defined also four specific priorities for the Slovak Presidency. These are as follows:

1. gender,
2. education in emergencies,
3. the humanitarian-development nexus,
4. nutrition and food security.

Research and experience from the ground have demonstrated that failure to address gendered impacts of crises is one of the biggest weaknesses and recurrent gaps in our disaster responses. Women and girls are often disproportionately negatively affected by humanitarian crises, in terms of casualties, social and economic inequality, as well as gender-based violence. It was reported that 60% of preventable maternal deaths take place in humanitarian emergencies. Moreover, the UN estimated that 1 in 5 refugees or displaced women have experienced sexual violence. This number, nevertheless, can be much higher. For instance, as many as 70% of women have experienced sexual or gender-based violence during the Syrian conflict. We need to take into account, that women and girls are often amongst the first responders to crises and their contributions towards recovery are undisputable.

Second priority of our presidency is to take into account specific needs of children affected by disasters and conflicts, especially when it comes to education. Today one in four of the world's school-aged children – nearly half a billion – lives in a country affected by crisis. Around 75 million of these children and youth are either already missing out on their education, receiving poor quality schooling or at risk of dropping out of school altogether. At the same time, we could argue that education is most needed in crisis contexts, as it contributes to reducing children's vulnerability to disasters and to making them less prone to be adversely affected by crises. In this regard, the Slovak Presidency will place special emphasis on promoting and strengthening the crucial role that education should play in humanitarian operations. We welcome and fully support the decision of the European Commission to increase funding for educational projects in emergency contexts from 2 to 4% of the EU's humanitarian aid budget. The launch of the Education Cannot Wait Fund at the World Humanitarian Summit is also much appreciated.

Last week I made a visit to refugee settlements in Lebanon. Hosting almost 1.5 million Syrian refugees and almost 0.5 million Palestinians, Lebanon has the largest number of refugees per capita in the world – every third is a refugee.

The situation on the ground moved me very much – I saw people sitting in dirt, or under provisional shelters, ripped off the possibility to lead a normal life. In the refugee settlement in the Valley of Beqaa, accompanied by the dedicated representatives of the UNHCR, I had the opportunity to talk to a family with 7 children. The father suffers from diabetes. The mother is the only bread winner. She carries the burden of the family on her shoulders. Obviously the treatment for the father poses a significant financial cost. That leads to a vicious circle that is nearly impossible to escape from. Only the son had the chance of going to school, the rest of the children do not have it. The future of the family is locked in poverty. That causes long term serious impacts on the lives of the children and endangers their future perspective. We must avoid raising a lost generation. Providing basic services such as health care and education is the key.

This visit reassured me once again that placing the education at the heart of our humanitarian response, especially of those under conditions of forced and protracted displacement is a must. In some of the settlements even two generations of people are raised. Education in emergencies is of utmost importance.

And it is also our national priority. We announced this year the very first call for proposals for the humanitarian projects focused on the education in emergencies to be provided in the refugee settlements in Syria and its neighbouring countries (in the total amount of 500 000 euro). We have also introduced a special scholarship programme for students from Syria to attend tertiary education at universities in Slovakia.

It is not only about the refugee settlements in Lebanon and the conflict in Syria. We shall not forget about the settlements in Kenya and other African countries hosting refugees. The situation that we see now, can get even worse, also due to the worst draught in Ethiopia in the last 50 years where 18 million people are in need of aid.

I would like to stress that we need to use the right forms of aid. There is no magic formula that will solve all problems - local context and resources need to determine our humanitarian response.

Our third specific priority is to promote a stronger humanitarian-development nexus in crisis response. We believe that the current scale and severity of humanitarian crises which I highlighted in the beginning and forced displacement requires interventions beyond the emergency nature of humanitarian assistance. A holistic global approach integrating humanitarian aid and development cooperation can make our crisis response more durable and sustainable. As the old proverb says: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." The Slovak Presidency will pay particular attention to bridging the humanitarian-development divide in order to prevent forced displacement from becoming protracted.

Last but not least, we intend to continue to put emphasis on food security as an essential component of crisis response. I believe this does not need any special advocacy.

The EU is at the forefront of providing food and nutritional assistance in the most vulnerable environments of today's world, but still nearly 800 million people were undernourished in 2015. Considerable part of this number is a result of extreme weather phenomena such as the El Niño, which might become even more extreme as a consequence of climate change. We must tackle these challenges, together with the international community, in a comprehensive manner that relies on preventing food insecurity through development at least as much as it does on humanitarian responses to food crises.

To conclude, Honourable Members, the Slovak Presidency considers as its major task and responsibility to further improve the EU's humanitarian response. Regarding our specific priorities, with adverse humanitarian crises becoming more urgent globally and more perceptible within Europe, we believe that progress in these outlined areas would not only make humanitarian aid more effective but also more sustainable.

I look forward to engaging with you over the course of the Slovak Presidency and beyond and to your views and remarks regarding the outlined priorities of our presidency.

Thank you for your attention.