

European Humanitarian Forum

Forum humanitaire européen



21-23
MAR
2022



European Humanitarian Forum

Diplomacy for greater humanitarian access

22/03/2022 – 14h15-16h00

Moderator: *Jean-Louis De Brouwer*, Director of the European Affairs Programme at the Egmont Institute.

Ministerial Segment: *Dorđe Radulović*, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Montenegro; *Aurélien Agbénonci*, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Benin.

Panelists: *Stefano Sannino*, Secretary-General of the European External Action Service (EEAS); *Robert Mardini*, Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); *Erika Ellamaa-Ots*, Permanent Representative of Estonia to the EU's Political and Security; *Harlem Désir*, Senior Vice President, International Rescue Committee (IRC); *Roland Kobia*, Head of EU Delegation in Ethiopia.

Summary of discussions:

The session allowed identifying key opportunities and challenges to advance and step up humanitarian diplomacy engagement for access in complex crises, not least by the EU and its Member States. Contributions and speeches identified a number of good practices of humanitarian diplomacy and how humanitarian issues can be better integrated into external policies. In this context, panelists and speakers shared experiences with humanitarian diplomacy in concrete crises and identified and assessed traditional and innovative diplomatic tools in support of European humanitarian action at bilateral, regional and international level.

- Panel

Panelists stressed that humanitarian diplomacy was about “getting the best deal for civilians” in a conflict (e.g. ICRC’s negotiation with Ukraine and Russia access to Mariupol) and promoting humanitarian aspects in diplomacy. Diplomacy helped humanitarian actions and humanitarian actions helped diplomacy.

On the ground, there were three kinds of access problems: (i) deliberate blockage (e.g. in Syria and Ukraine), (ii) bureaucracy (e.g. in Yemen) and (iii) impact of certain anti-terrorist measures (e.g. in Nigeria). In order to succeed to overcome these problems, it was key to build trust with parties to a conflict and their respective supporters through continuous dialogue (“before, during and after the conflict”), consistency and good coordination. Good knowledge of the dynamics of a conflict were essential (“no one size fits all”).

Humanitarian principles needed to be applied in the context of the situation on the ground. Humanitarian principles and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (the purpose of which was to influence the behaviour of parties to the conflict) were not negotiable, but concrete situations may warrant “the need to pick the right battle”. Diplomacy was about the “need to talk to everyone, to compromise, to maintain an open dialogue and to keep channels open.” Often, success could only be achieved through discrete

behind-the-scenes negotiations (e.g. on benchmarks/criteria on the role of women in humanitarian action in Afghanistan).

At multilateral level, the Ukraine war posed a specifically serious problem, with the aggressor being a permanent member of the UN Security Council, challenging the very basic principles of the UN. However, the EU was able to play a key role, e.g., in the outreach in support of the respective UNGA resolution.

Specific challenges/obstacles for successful humanitarian diplomacy included the polarization of humanitarian action, the need to bridge the gap between practitioners and diplomats (“no silos”) as well as anti-Western sentiments by conflict parties, which could also reflect on the EU. It was therefore important to draw a line between the political and the humanitarian space and take a balanced approach (a focus on certain regions or part of the population was counterproductive, e.g. in Myanmar or Ethiopia). It was therefore important to draw a line between the political and the humanitarian space and take a balanced approach (a focus on certain regions or part of the population was counterproductive, e.g. in Myanmar or Ethiopia).

The EU had a range of diplomatic tools at its disposal, such as Human Rights and IHL due diligence, IHL fact sheets, documentation of IHL violations, common humanitarian messages, demarches, outreach to non-like-minded and support/promotion of IHL and the fight against impunity/ICC. The EU’s new “Strategic Compass” as such did not contain references to humanitarian diplomacy, as it was primarily about providing capabilities in support of policies in light of the growing diplomatic responsibilities of the EU. The EU could do even more outreach with non-like-minded states and, e.g., promote the idea to establish a specific body for the protection of humanitarian access.

- Ministerial Segment

Minister Đorđe Radulović referred to the Russian attack on Ukraine as a turning point. The NATO member Montenegro had imposed sanctions on Russia and actively engaged in the battle of narratives, e.g. by supporting the ruling of the ICJ. He applauded EU guidance on humanitarian assistance in Ukraine and affirmed that Montenegro had provided financial and humanitarian aid to UA.

Minister Aurélien Agbénonci warned against ignoring that humanitarian aid was always provided in a political context. He thanked the EU for their humanitarian actions on the ground, including through negotiations and outreach to stakeholders: “actors on the ground are the ones that are making the difference”.
