

SPEECH

by

COMMISSIONER JUTTA URPILAINEN

at

**the first General Assembly meeting
of the Sahel Alliance**

Nouakchott (Mauritania), 25 February 2020

Opening remarks

Minister Le Drian, Assembly members, ladies and gentlemen,

Before I start, let me thank Mr Le Drian, President of this first General Assembly, for giving me the floor.

This is my first trip to the Sahel region since taking up my post as Commissioner for International Partnerships, and I am honoured to be with you all today.

I am especially honoured to be here at such an important time for the Sahel. This promises to be a crucial year, in which we must seize the political momentum and the many opportunities to get things done, improve impact and move forward.

This will not be a simple task. We all know that the Sahel faces great and complex challenges. The fact that we are meeting today shows our collective ambition to overcome those challenges. On behalf of the EU let me say that we are more determined than ever to support this region's moves towards stabilisation and recovery.

That is why, two years on from the 2018 Conference in Brussels, we are organising a high-level meeting in Brussels on 26 March, at the initiative of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel.

This meeting will follow some major political events on the Sahel, such as the Pau Summit in early January, with the aim to reinvigorate our partnership with the G5 Sahel countries, based on a common and

renewed commitment. I can assure you that the Sahel is a top priority for me as Commissioner.

Building this momentum is more important than ever. We are faced with a dramatically deteriorating situation. We must reverse this trend in order to restore a long-lasting peace in the region.

Without peace, sustainable and inclusive development cannot be achieved; the impact of our actions on the ground would remain limited and too easily overturned.

In my view, this is why the peace-development-humanitarian nexus is crucial, if we are to bring real and lasting stability and progress to the Sahel.

Colleagues,

If we can make a tangible difference to the lives of people in the Sahel, we can move towards a more stable future for the region.

The EU rapidly understood the vital role of the Sahel Alliance. That's why we have been closely involved in it from the outset, providing considerable political and technical support, as well as funding its Secretariat.

We are and will remain fully committed to the Alliance. However, we must also realise that the situation on the ground is tense. In response, rather than spending more time on new mechanisms, let's focus instead on improving what we already have.

I am convinced that the Sahel Alliance must focus its work on crisis zones, where the state is weak or no longer present, where we cannot deliver our aid properly and efficiently.

In these areas, the issue is not so much about investing more money; it is more about how to improve what we are doing, so that we get better impact and results more quickly. This may involve us all taking greater risks to meet the challenges on the ground.

Our first and most pressing challenge is to respond to the many legitimate expectations of the most vulnerable people in the Sahel, especially young people and women. We must reverse the *infernal* cycle of violence, of school closures, of a lack of social services, of a weak State, and instead offer alternatives and hope.

When they are able to fulfil their potential, these vulnerable groups can become forces for positive and lasting change. We must help all people transform their hopes for the future into reality – and, by doing so, turn the region's fortunes around.

This, I believe, is where the added value of the Sahel Alliance lies.

I fully agree that we must give a political boost to the work and results of the Sahel Alliance.

This will require strong coordination between international donors, a stronger partnership with our Sahel partners and a more strategic and political Sahel Alliance.