

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY ALLIANCE SAHEL
MADRID - MONDAY – 4 APRIL – 16:00**

SPEECH BY COMMISSIONER URPILAINEN

Minister Albares Bueno,

Members of the General Assembly of the Sahel Alliance,

Dear colleagues and friends,

Today's General Assembly comes at a critical time for the people of Sahel. For us, as a development community. And for the world as a whole.

Last week, I travelled to Niger, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana, where I witnessed first-hand our solid bilateral partnerships and listened to my counterparts and their concerns.

I discussed at length the challenges in the region, and our partners' commitments to tackling them.

First, the politics related to insecurity, which is deteriorating.

People are leaving their homes in record numbers to flee drought, lack of services, and violent attacks by armed groups.

Beyond the region, the threat of spill over towards coastal states is already a reality.

We must act now to avoid a further expansion.

Secondly, food insecurity.

In the G5 Sahel [and West Africa], over 10 million [35 million] people could be facing hunger and malnutrition during the forthcoming season.

With Russia's aggression against Ukraine pushing up commodity prices, these numbers could rise even more.

Short-term, our top priority must be to meet urgent food needs.

We also need to empower security forces to prevent violent attacks disrupting harvests.

Long-term, we need structural policies to address the underlying causes of food and nutrition insecurity, and to strengthen local food production systems, so as to achieve strategic food autonomy.

In two days' time, we will debate all this at an event in Paris on food security in the Sahel and Lake Chad region.

It is co-organised by Commissioner Lenarčič and myself, together with the Global Network Against Food Crises, the Secretariat of the Sahel and West Africa Club.

This will be another opportunity to walk the talk and take concrete action on food security.

Thirdly, let's remember our core business as Sahel Alliance: harnessing the great potential that lies in this vast region.

We have some key priorities that we must pursue intensely.

In a region where nearly two thirds of the population is under 25, education and opportunities for youth and women are a big priority. I have discussed our support at length during my mission last week.

There is also great potential for renewable energy like solar and wind and hydroelectric energy. And we should help develop resilient infrastructure, in line with the priorities of our Global Gateway strategy.

We have proven that we can deliver results even in the most fragile and remote areas, for example through the Development Emergency Programme [Programme de Développement d'Urgence].

This success story should become the rule, not the exception.

To do this, we need to strengthen our partnership, be more effective as the context evolves.

We also need to operate along the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The need to support the civilian surge is ever more relevant.

In practice, this means trying to sustain local administrations even in fragile contexts.

With our support, they can deploy basic services.

This would make them more legitimate, inclusive and help people have more trust in them.

Over time, such an approach should deliver more sustainability and renew the social contract between the States and their citizens.

Let's ensure our Alliance delivers on that.

(532 words)