



# BELGIUM STAYS AND CHOOSES DIGNITY, HUMANITY AND HOPE. THE NEW 2026 HUMANITARIAN STRATEGY.



By Edouard Xia, (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/edouard-xia/>) Alexandre Piron (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/alexandre-piron/>) (6 February 2026)  
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The international humanitarian system is in turmoil. Armed conflict is once again becoming normalized, and the principle that “*might makes right*” is experiencing a troubling resurgence. International law and humanitarian norms are increasingly under attack. The world appears to be moving in the opposite direction from the vision articulated in the preamble of the UN Charter. Many actors and analysts sense that the international system is preparing more for war than for peace. In this fragile balance between national security and human dignity, the latter is increasingly being sidelined. At the same time, several of the world’s largest humanitarian donors are retreating, thereby widening an already significant funding gap. Numerous crises are affected, including Sudan, Gaza, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen, and Myanmar, to name but a few. The year 2025 recorded the highest number of armed conflicts in decades, and 2026 appears equally bleak, if not worse[1]. This is equally true for recorded violence against humanitarian actors in the field[2].

Against this backdrop, Belgium stands out as a humanitarian champion. On 28 January, the country presented its new humanitarian strategy—a long-awaited document, given that the previous version dated back to 2014. This is particularly true considering the various crises experienced by the European continent in the last decade: refugee crisis in 2016, Covid, Ukraine, Gaza just to name a few. Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Prévot made this positioning explicit, stating: “*In a world where people are retreating, Belgium stays. We choose dignity, humanity and hope.*” This initiative unfolds in a context marked by intense debates on how to do better with fewer resources. In recent months, Brussels has indeed emerged as a focal point for humanitarian actors seeking renewed commitment and coordination. In an increasingly geopoliticized humanitarian system, the European Union still appears as a guiding light[3]. Yet, its traditionally principled approach is increasingly being called into question. Over time, the EU has gradually moved away from the principle of independence enshrined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid of 2007, in favor of more overtly political rationales, including security, migration, and economic considerations.

In its new strategy that was drafted concurrently to important inter-national events (USAID dismantling, European donors funding cuts and a new Belgian government), Belgium reaffirms its principled and ethical approach to humanitarian aid, thereby positioning itself at the forefront of the debate. Humanitarian assistance is elevated to a clear political priority, supported by strong political will and an unusual alignment of key international portfolios. The Conference on Fragility held in Brussels on 19 January illustrated this momentum, bringing together three high-level officials of Belgian origin publicly defending humanitarian aid—the so-called “*Dream Team*”: recently appointed UNDP Administrator Alexander De Croo, European Commissioner Hadja Lahbib, and Belgium’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Maxime Prévot.

Fundamentally, the new strategy does not depart significantly from the 2014 framework. Belgium's humanitarian funding—spared from the 25% budget cut announced in a context of broader fiscal constraints—continues to be largely channeled through core funding and flexible mechanisms. The approach remains human-centered and focused on complex crises. Geographic and thematic priorities that were identified in the 2014 strategy remain and are reaffirmed. The main innovations stem from an inclusive consultation process with the humanitarian community, which highlighted needs on the ground and was informed by work conducted by the Special Evaluation Office of the Belgian Development Cooperation[4]. Localization, protection, and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus emerge as key priorities, responding to contemporary debates emerging from the humanitarian system itself. Humanitarian aid is thus explicitly linked to longer-term efforts in development, prevention, peacebuilding, and the fight against climate change, all contributing to safety and stability. This is in line with Belgium's 3D approach reaffirmed with the Arizona government.

The strategy further affirms that humanitarian assistance cannot substitute for political solutions and emphasizes Belgium's willingness to operate in contexts where needs are greatest and access is most challenging. To this end, Belgium intends to use its diplomatic voice to uphold international humanitarian law, stressing that humanitarian access is not a request but a legal obligation. In doing so, the country signals its ambition to go beyond financial contributions alone. While not among the largest donors, Belgium seeks to remain a reliable and vocal actor within the international humanitarian system.

The above priorities have been translated into six strategic pillars: (1) a *principled and ethical approach*; (2) provide *flexible and quality funding*; (3) build and maintain *trustworthy partnerships and donor alliances*; (4) a people-centered humanitarian action working with *local actors*; (5) engage in a strong *humanitarian diplomacy*; and finally (6) provide *tailored monitoring, evaluation and risk-management*. These six pillars provide a wide range of commitments and strategies for Belgium to answer to the funding gap and the crisis the humanitarian principles are facing.

Belgian humanitarian aid thus reflects broader patterns in its foreign policy, notably its strong support for multilateral institutions. The UN humanitarian aid system remains the cornerstone of Belgium's approach. This UN stage, particularly in the humanitarian system, also enables Belgium to "*punch about its weight*", this time not only on the form but also in the content. However, supporting the system does not necessarily imply defending the *status quo*. On the contrary, Belgium actively advocates reforms aimed at improving efficiency. This stance is consistent not only with the values and principles the country upholds, but also with its strategic interest in being embedded in a stable regional and global environment, as dehumanization ultimately affects everyone. Belgium's engagement in humanitarian aid thus reveals its ongoing effort to strike a balance between its humanist and liberal worldview and its growing involvement in the defense sector.

Admittedly, a strategy does not feed children, nor does it rebuild hospitals. Yet it clarifies priorities and signals what Belgium stands for. It also answers to a dire need to update its 2014 strategy to answer contemporary challenges. The new strategy is ambitious and

touches on many important reforms and contemporary issues and debates. This in itself deserves being pinned out. Much remains to be done, and the decisive phase now begins with the implementation of the strategy. In this endeavor, both the Belgian government and the many humanitarian NGOs have clearly reaffirmed their willingness to work together, as a complementary approach is indeed indispensable in today's complex world. "*Belgium stays and chooses dignity, humanity and hope*" thus resonates in the void left by retreating donors. It may yet rally like-minded partners. Team Europe is foreseen as a valuable and effective platform, this remaining conditional to the evolution of EU member states respective political evolution in the next years. Nonetheless, the coming months will reveal how much difference Belgium can make in a world where a principled approach increasingly appears the exception rather than the norm.

[1] International Committee of the Red Cross (2025, 11 December). *Humanitarian Outlook 2026: A world succumbing to war*.

[2] United Nations (2025, April 2). *Amid Record High Killing of Humanitarian Workers, Speakers Implore Security Council to Ensure Accountability for Attacks on Personnel in Conflict Zones*. Meetings Coverage Security Council, SC/16035.

[3] Xia, E. & Piron, A. (2025). The Geopolitical Impact of USAID's Retreat on Humanitarian Aid: Towards a Complementary Approach between China and the EU? *Egmont Policy Brief*, 377.

[4] Special Evaluation Office of the Belgian Development Cooperation (2022, September). *Evaluation of the Belgian strategy for humanitarian aid. How does Belgium meet the needs of people affected by humanitarian crises?*

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## EGMONT

Royal Institute for International Relations  
Rue des Petits Carmes 24A  
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

## POSTAL ADDRESS

Rue des Petits Carmes 15  
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

## CONTACT

 +32 (0)2 213 40 20

 [info@egmontinstitute.be](mailto:info@egmontinstitute.be) (mailto:info@egmontinstitute.be)