

The use of chemical weapons in Syria cannot be allowed to go unchallenged

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Thank you very much indeed Mr President. And thank you to the Secretary-General. Secretary-General you gave us a catalogue of danger in the Middle East, including Gaza, Yemen and Iraq. It is no disrespect to those issues, that today like other speakers, I will concentrate on Syria. The United Kingdom will be ready to put its shoulder to the wheel on those other issues when the time comes.

Mr President, the situation we face today, and the reason we are in this Council today, arise wholly and solely from the use of chemical weapons on the Syrian people, [highly likely] by the Syrian regime. Not just once, Mr President, but consistently, persistently, over the past five years. The highest degree of responsibility, to quote the Russian Ambassador, is indeed what this Council, and in particular the P5, are for, with that it is our duty to uphold.

Mr President, the British Cabinet met recently and they concluded that the Assad regime has a track record of the use of chemical weapons and that it is highly likely the regime is responsible for Saturday's attack. This is a further example of the erosion of international law in relation to the use of chemical weapons, as my French and American colleagues have set out. And it is deeply concerning, but more importantly than that Mr President, the use of chemical weapons cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. The British Cabinet has agreed on the need to take action to alleviate humanitarian distress and to deter the further use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime and we will continue to work with our friends and allies to coordinate an international response to that end.

Mr President, the Secretary-General mentioned the Cold War. The Cold War, of course, was bracketed by East-West cooperation. We have been on the same side as Russia. In April 1945, [Soviet Forces] liberated Vienna as part of our joint efforts to bring peace to Europe. In 1995, they passed the Dayton Accords as part of our joint efforts to bring peace and stability to Bosnia. But in 2018, they refused to work with us to bring peace to Syria. Instead, Mr President, since the first attack on Ghouta and CW use in 2013, the Joint Investigative Mechanism has ascribed two uses of mustard gas to Da'esh, three uses of chlorine to the Syrian regime and one use sarin to the Syrian regime before the latest attack. As my French colleague has set out, the UK, the US and France are members in good standing of the Chemical Weapons Convention. We are members and supporters of the OPCW and its fact-finding mission. We would have dispatched an investigative mission in the debates in this Council earlier this week, but only Russia and Bolivia blocked that. Mr President, Syria is the latest in a pernicious chronology of disregard for international law and disrespect for the international institutions that we have built together to keep us collectively safe, by Russia. This is revealed, Mr President, in actions over Georgia ten years ago, over MH17, over the attack in Salisbury, which we will return to next week. Let me repeat what I said in this Council last week, my Government, the British people are not Russophobe. We have no quarrel with the Russian people. We respect Russia as a country. We prefer a productive relationship with Russia but it is Russia's own actions that have led to this situation.

Mr President, what has taken place in Syria to date, is in itself a violation of the UN Charter. No principle of purpose of the Charter is upheld or served by the use of CW on innocent civilians. On the contrary, to stand by, to ignore the requirements of justice and accountability and the preservation of the non-proliferation regime is to place all our security, not just that of the Syrian people, at the mercy of a Russian veto. We will not sacrifice the international order we have collectively built to the Russian desire to protect its ally at all costs.

Mr President, the Russian Ambassador set out what Russia is doing on the ground in Syria. He thought this might be inconvenient for me to hear. Mr President, it's not inconvenient for me to point out that Russia has given \$5.5 million to the UN appeal. The United Kingdom has given \$160 million, Mr President, and this is part of a contribution totalling \$3.5 billion in all. It is not inconvenient for me to say that, it may be inconvenient for the Russian Ambassador to hear it. The Russian Ambassador also asked why we were not joining in in trying to stabilise actions in Syria and bring about peace.

We have tried Mr President. We have tried very hard to support Stefan de Mistura, in getting the Geneva political process underway and we shall continue to do so. But we do not join Russia sadly, because Russia's efforts have not been to try and restart the Geneva process. Instead they have been to support Syria in the use of CW and the bombardment of the Syrian people. In the area known as T4, they helped the regime liberate this area, but they took their eye off the ball and Da'esh took it back. They took it again but sadly foreign fighters have been able to re-establish themselves there. This is not de-escalation. This is not political progress. This is a gross distortion by Russia of what is actually happening on the ground.

Mr President, these are truly exceptional circumstances that we face today. My US and French colleagues have set out in great detail the catalogue of awful things that are happening to the Syrian people. This catalogue goes to the heart of what the Geneva Conventions, the non-proliferation regime, the United Nations and this Council are for. It is not only dangerous what Russia is doing, Mr President, in vetoing our resolutions and in supporting the Syrian regime's actions against its own people. It is ultimately prejudicial to our security. It will let Da'esh re-establish itself. It is something, Mr President, that we believe we need to take action to defend.

Thank you.

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