Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary: UN must get access to chemical attack site

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In a news interview today, Foreign Secretary William Hague spoke of the importance of the United Nations team being given access to the site of Wednesday's chemical attack near Damascus and pledged the UK's support for an urgent investigation.

The Foreign Secretary said:

It's now forty eight hours since the reports started to come in of what seems to have been a terrible atrocity near Damascus including the use of chemical weapons. People will have seen some of the film footage of the people, including so many children, affected and, clearly, many hundreds of people killed.

This is not something that a humane or civilised world can ignore. Our priority is to make sure the world knows the facts of what has happened and that means the UN team that is in Damascus, only 20 minutes travel away, being able to get there and to investigate.

The United Kingdom called the meeting of the UN Security Council on Wednesday night and Security Council members expressed their support for the UN team to go there. They haven't yet been able to and already it seems the Assad regime has something to hide. Why else have they not allowed the UN team to go there? But, of course, we hope they will be able to go there.

I discussed this this morning with the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and he agreed that time is of the essence, that he is pressing for the UN team to be able to gain unimpeded access to the site. He is sending other people to Damascus. So I told him he had our strong support in that and that Britain will help in any way that we can and I'm encouraging other countries to support this too.

I hope to speak to the Russian Foreign Minister later today, I discussed it with Secretary Kerry of the United States last night and with many other countries, including the Turkish Foreign Minister, who was here yesterday and the Qatari Foreign Minister who will be here today.

So this is our priority at the moment: to make sure that a UN team can investigate on the ground and establish the facts.

If that doesn’t happen though, within some days, since time is of the essence in these things - the evidence will deteriorate over a matter of days - then we will need to be ready to go back to the Security Council to get a stronger mandate and for the world to speak together more forcefully about this so that there can be access.

This is what we are focused on and we’re working with countries all over the world to try to bring this about and to try to establish the truth to the satisfaction of the world about what is clearly a terrible atrocity.

Commenting on the nature of the attack, the Foreign Secretary later said:

Well the only possible explanation of what we’ve been able to see is that it was a chemical attack. Clearly many, many hundreds of people have been killed, some of the estimates are well over a thousand. There is no other plausible explanation for casualties so intense in such a small area on this scale.

Now I know that some people in the world would like to say this is some kind of conspiracy brought about by the opposition in Syria. I think the chances of that are vanishingly small and so we do believe that this is a chemical attack by the Assad regime on a large scale. But we would like the United Nations to be able to assess that, so that for those who don’t believe that, for those who doubt, the evidence can be gathered. But that is certainly our opinion.

Further information

Read the Foreign Secretary’s

statement following the attack

and the

transcript of his press conference with the French Foreign Minister

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