Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary's statement on Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and update on the campaign against Daesh

2017-11-07

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will make a statement updating the House on the campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

But I should like to begin by informing the House that I called the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mr Zarif, this morning to discuss the case of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I expressed my anxiety about her suffering and the ordeal of her family and I repeated my hope for a swift solution.

I also voiced my concern at the suggestion emanating from one branch of the Iranian judiciary that my remarks to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee last week had some bearing on Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case.

The UK government has no doubt that she was on holiday in Iran when she was arrested last year – and that was the sole purpose of her visit.

My point was that I disagreed with the Iranian view that training journalists was a crime, not that I wanted to lend any credence to Iranian allegations that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been engaged in such activity. I accept that my remarks could have been clearer in that respect and I'm glad to provide this clarification.

I'm sure the House will join me in paying tribute to the tireless campaigning of Mr Ratcliffe on behalf of his wife and we will not relent in our efforts to help all our consular cases in Iran.

Mr Zarif told me that any recent developments in the case had no link to my testimony last week and he would continue to seek a solution on humanitarian grounds. I will visit Iran in the coming weeks where I will discuss all our consular cases.

I turn now to the campaign against Daesh.

In the summer of 2014, Daesh swept down the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, occupying thousands of square miles of Iraqi territory, pillaging cities, massacring and enslaving minorities, and seeking to impose by pitiless violence a demented vision of an Islamist utopia.

Daesh had gathered strength in eastern Syria, using the opportunity created by that country's civil war to seize oilfields and carve out a base from which to launch their assault on Iraq. Today, I can tell the House that Daesh have been rolled back on every battlefront.

Thanks to the courage and resolve of Iraq's Security Forces, our partners in Syria, and the steadfast action of the 73 members of the Global Coalition, including this country,

Daesh have lost 90% of the territory they once held in Iraq and Syria – including Raqqa, their erstwhile capital – and 6 million people have been freed from their rule.

When my Rt Hon Friend the former Defence Secretary last updated the House in July, the biggest city in northern Iraq, Mosul, had just been liberated.

Since then, Iraqi forces have broken Daesh's grip on the towns of Tal Afar and Hawija and cleared the terrorists from all but a relatively small area near the Syrian border, demonstrating how the false and failed 'caliphate' is crumbling before our eyes.

The House will join me in paying tribute to the men and women of the British armed forces, who have been vital to every step of the advance.

Over 600 British soldiers are in Iraq where they have helped to train 50,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces and the RAF has delivered 1,352 air strikes against Daesh in Iraq and 263 in Syria – more than any other air force apart from the United States. I turn now to Syria where, on 20 October, the Global Coalition confirmed the fall of Raqqa after 3 years of brutal occupation.

The struggle was long and hard; I acknowledge the price that has been paid by the Coalition's partner forces on the ground and, most especially, by the civilian population of Raqqa. Throughout the military operation, the Department for International Development has been working with partners in Raqqa Province to supply food, water, health care and shelter wherever possible.

On 22 October, my Rt Hon Friend the International Development Secretary

announced another £10 million of UK aid

, in order to clear the landmines sown by Daesh, restock hospitals and mobile surgical units with essential medicines, and provide clean water for 15,000 people.

The permanent defeat of Daesh in Syria – by which I mean removing the conditions that allowed them to seize large areas in the first place – will require a political settlement and that must include a transition away from the Asad regime that did so much to create the conditions for the rise of Daesh.

How such a settlement is reached is, of course, a matter for Syrians themselves and we will continue to support the work of the United Nations Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, and the Geneva process.

I am encouraged by how America and Russia have stayed in close contact over the future of Syria and we must continue to emphasise to the Kremlin that instead of blindly supporting a murderous regime – even after UN investigators have found its forces guilty of using sarin nerve gas, most recently at Khan Shaykoun in April – Russia should join the international community and support a negotiated settlement in Syria under the auspices of the UN.

Turning to Iraq, more than 2 million people have returned to their homes in areas liberated from Daesh, including 265,000 who have gone back to Mosul. Britain is providing over £200 million of practical life-saving assistance for Iraqi civilians.

We are helping to clear the explosives that were laid by Daesh, restore water supplies that the terrorists sabotaged, and give clean water to 200,000 people and health care to 115,000.

Now that Daesh is close to defeat in Iraq, the country's leaders must resolve the political tensions that – in part – paved the way for its advance in 2014.

The Kurdistan Region held a unilateral referendum on independence on 25 September, a decision we did not support. Since then, Masoud Barzani has stepped down as President of the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraqi forces have reasserted federal control over disputed territory, including the city of Kirkuk.

We are working alongside our allies to reduce tensions in northern Iraq; rather than reopen old conflicts, the priority must be to restore the stability, prosperity and national unity that is the right of every Iraqi.

A general election will take place in Iraq next May, creating an opportunity for parties to set out their respective visions of a country that overcomes sectarianism and serves every citizen, including Kurds.

But national reconciliation will require justice, and justice demands that Daesh are held accountable for their atrocities in Iraq and elsewhere. That is why I acted over a year ago – in concert with the Government of Iraq – to launch the global campaign to bring Daesh to justice.

In September, the

Security Council unanimously adopted UN Resolution 2379

, a British-drafted text – co-sponsored by 46 countries – that will establish a UN investigation to help gather and preserve the evidence of Daesh crimes in Iraq.

Every square mile of territory that Daesh have lost is 1 square mile less for them to exploit and tax and plunder, and the impending destruction of the so-called ‘caliphate’ will reduce their ability to fund terrorism abroad and attract new recruits.

Yet Daesh will still try to inspire attacks by spreading their hateful ideology in cyberspace even after they have lost every inch of their physical domain.

That’s why Britain leads the Global Coalition’s efforts to counter Daesh propaganda, through a Communications Cell based here in London, and Daesh’s total propaganda output has fallen by half since 2015.

But social media companies can and must do more, particularly to speed up the detection and removal of dangerous material and prevent it from being uploaded in the first place, hence my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister co-hosted an event at the UN General Assembly in September on how to stop terrorists from using the internet.

The government has always made clear that any British nationals who join Daesh have chosen to make themselves legitimate targets for the Coalition. We expect that most foreign fighters will die in the terrorist domain they opted to serve but some may surrender or try to come home, including to the UK.

As the government has previously said, anyone who returns to this country after taking part in the conflict in Syria or Iraq must expect to be investigated for reasons of national security. While foreign fighters face the consequences of their actions, the valour and sacrifice of the armed forces of many nations – including our own – has prevented a terrorist entity from taking root in the heart of the Middle East.

I commend this statement to the House.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-statement-on-nazanin-zaghari-ratcliffe-and-update-on-the-campaign-against-daesh