Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

The people of the Middle East must be able to trust that progress is possible

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Madam President,

I thank Robert Serry for his briefing and the Permanent Observer of Palestine and the Permanent Representative of Israel for their statements.

The government of the United Kingdom warmly welcomes Secretary Kerry's 19 July announcement that Israel and the Palestinians have reached an agreement that establishes the basis for resuming direct final status negotiations.

We pay tribute to the efforts of Secretary Kerry and his team, and commend the leadership shown by both Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas. The United Kingdom stands ready to do all that we can over the coming months to support the parties and the United States in their efforts to achieve a lasting peace for the Israeli and Palestinian people.

The European Union set out clearly its full support for US efforts at yesterday's Foreign Affairs Council. There is also a vital role for Arab states to build on the constructive steps taken so far to reiterate the strategic importance of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Friday's announcement is of course only a beginning, not an end. We welcome Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas' clear commitment to a two-state solution and to work to achieve peace for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. Now more than ever, it is vital that both show bold and decisive leadership.

With this new momentum, the Israeli and Palestinian people must be able to trust that progress is possible. This would be undermined by a repeat of recent events such as further settlement announcements, the use of live fire in demonstrations by the Israeli Defence Forces and rockets from Gaza into Israel. We urge all sides to exercise restraint and look forward.

As talks resume, we should not forget Gaza. Gaza must be an integral part of any two-state solution. As our Minister for the Middle East saw last month, for ordinary Gazans the Strip remains a desperately difficult place to live. In the heat of summer, Gazans face very poor living conditions, including regular and sustained power cuts.

It will be important that Gaza benefits fully from any economic package which is being prepared to accompany the political track, including the easing of Israeli restrictions on movements of goods and people. The United Kingdom believes that an improved economy is not only essential for the people, including the children, of Gaza, but firmly in Israel's security interests.

Current US efforts, and the strong commitment shown by the parties themselves, reflect the best chance for many years of securing peace. We must all unite to help reach our shared goal of a negotiated two-state solution where a safe and secure Israel can live in peace with an independent and viable Palestinian state.

Madam President, turning to Syria.

It was with great dismay that we heard Valerie Amos' briefing before this Council last week. It is truly shocking that more than 6 million people require humanitarian assistance and that 4 million people are no longer able to meet their basic food needs yet the Assad regime continues to prevent the United Nations from delivering aid effectively inside Syria.

With the death toll now well over 100,000, the situation in Syria gets worse by the day. Since last July an average of nearly 200 people have been killed every 24 hours.

What started off as peaceful protests over two years ago has become a protracted conflict by a murderous regime, aided and abetted by Hizballah and Iran. The Assad regime has continued to ramp up its brutal military offensive over recent months, as witnessed today in Homs, where thousands of innocent civilians are currently trapped in their homes with limited access to food, water or electricity.

Madam President,

The countries of the region have already provided sanctuary to 1.7 million Syrians. More will come. We urge all neighbouring countries to keep their borders open for Syrians to escape the tragic and dangerous situation they are facing at home.

In response, the United Kingdom has doubled its support for humanitarian assistance, bringing the total to over half a billion dollars, including support for Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan and Lebanon. G8 countries last month committed over $1.5 billion. Yet, the UN's $5.2 billion Syria appeal for 2013 is only 35 per cent funded. The needs for aid in Syria will sadly only grow, and without help Lebanon and Jordan risk being destabilised. Member states need to contribute more, and encourage others to do more, now and in the long term.

Madam President,

The continuing deterioration of the human rights situation is also of grave concern. The Commission of Inquiry's latest report found that the conflict had reached new levels of brutality. War crimes, crimes against humanity and gross human rights violations continue at a frightening rate. We remain at the forefront of the international community in calling for full accountability for all those responsible for human rights violations and abuses. This Council should refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court without delay.

Madam President,

There is a growing body of limited but persuasive information showing that the regime has used and continues to use chemical weapons, including sarin. Use of chemical weapons is a war crime. We call on Syria to allow the UN unfettered access to investigate incidents of chemical weapons use in Syria.

On 17 June, the G8 re-affirmed support for a second conference in Geneva, leading to the creation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers. Yet the regime's offensive of recent weeks has made it even harder for this conference to take place.

We continue to support the expanded National Coalition and its new president, Ahmed al-Jarba. The Coalition remains the most legitimate and credible representative of the Syrian people. They have made clear their commitment to a future democratic Syria in which the rights of all Syrians are respected. We must not conflate this moderate opposition with terrorist groups.

We must not accept what Assad wants us to believe – that the only alternative to his brutal regime is extremists and terrorists. There are millions of Syrians who want a peaceful and democratic future, and legitimate forces that are fighting for their interests. We should be on their side.

Madam President,

Despite our differences – this Council shares some fundamental aims: to end the conflict, to stop Syria fragmenting, to let the people decide who governs them and to prevent the growth of violent extremism. As a Council we need to recommit to working with the Parties in a meaningful way towards a viable political settlement, based on last year's Geneva Communiqué.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-people-of-the-middle-east-must-be-able-to-trust-that-progress-is-possible