Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on Syria

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AS DELIVERED

“Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a statement to update the House on the crisis in Syria; a crisis which is still intensifying. 60,000 Syrians are now believed to have died, six hundred thousand people have become refugees, 2 million people are internally displaced and four million people are in desperate need.

To illustrate the true horror of this conflict, 1,000 civilians were reportedly killed in one six-day period over Christmas. On Christmas Day opposition activists reported that seventeen people were executed at a checkpoint in the Damascus suburbs – nine of them from one family. The regime has used SCUD missiles to target populated areas, and deployed cluster munitions. Entire urban districts have been reduced to rubble in cities like Homs and Aleppo.

The House will join me in expressing our solidarity with millions of courageous Syrian people in the face of this appalling brutality.

We continue to believe that the best way to end this bloodshed and to protect all Syria’s communities is through a political transition.

Our country has a moral obligation to help save lives in Syria, and a national interest in ensuring that the country provides no haven for terrorist activity.

We know that to achieve lasting stability we must work with the Syrian opposition and countries of the region, not try to impose a political settlement from outside. And we are determined that all our actions will uphold UK and international law, and support justice and accountability for the Syrian people themselves.

In the coming weeks we will focus on six principal areas:

First, we will intensify our diplomatic efforts to reach a political transition. We are actively supporting the efforts of UN/Arab League Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi who has travelled to Damascus, to Moscow for talks with the Russian Government, and who is due to hold trilateral talks with Russian and the United States this week. My Ministerial colleagues and I are in regular contact with him and expect to hold further talks with him in London later this month. Our goal remains to persuade Russia and China to join us in putting the full weight of the UN Security Council behind a political transition plan for Syria.

Second, we will continue our work to help the Syrian National Coalition develop its plans for the future of Syria. Since I last updated the House I attended the Friends of Syria meeting in Marrakech, where the US and many other countries followed us in recognising the National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and where $150m dollars was pledged to support the humanitarian effort. The Coalition is enlarging its membership to include Christian, Kurdish and other minority communities. At a meeting in Istanbul this week we saw encouraging signs of the Coalition making every effort to broaden its support further and build on its legitimacy, although much work remains to be done.

We're working to strengthen moderate political forces in Syria committed to a democratic future for the country. We've provided £7.4 million of non-lethal support to the Syrian Opposition, civil society and human rights defenders, and I can announce now that we will provide an additional two million pounds of support, bringing the total to £9.4m.

All our assistance is designed to help to save lives, or to mitigate the impact of the conflict, or to support people trying to achieve a free and democratic Syria. It includes solar powered lighting, generators, communication equipment and water purification kits to help opposition groups, and satellite communication devices for activists to document Human Rights violations and abuses so that one day the perpetrators of appalling crimes can be brought to justice. It involves support for local level administration councils providing services to Syrian people during the conflict. We've given training to more than 300 Syrian journalists, who are striving to develop alternative sources of media and freedom of the press in Syria, and are training activists working to create a network of peace building committees across five cities in Syria.

We are also helping the National Coalition to coordinate the international humanitarian response, and have provided a humanitarian adviser to work with them. At all times we urge the Coalition to ensure that all opposition groups meet their commitments on human rights.

Third, we will continue to increase the pressure on the regime to stop the violence.

In December we argued that the EU sanctions regime on Syria, including the arms embargo, should be rolled over for three months until 1 March rather than for twelve months, so that there would be an earlier review of it. And we have secured this position. We believed it was important not to freeze EU policy for a whole year just as a new opposition Coalition was being launched and the conflict was intensifying on the ground.

No decisions have yet been made to change the support we provide to the Syrian National Coalition or the Syrian people. But European countries now have the flexibility to consider taking additional steps to try to save lives if there is no progress in the near future.

Clearly the best outcome for the Syrian people would be a diplomatic breakthrough, bring an end to the bloodshed and establishing a new Syrian government able to restore stability.

However, we must keep open options to help save lives in Syria and to assist opposition groups opposed to extremism if the violence continues. We should send a strong signal to Assad that all options are on the table. We will therefore seek to amend the EU sanctions so that the possibility of additional assistance is not closed off.

No one can be sure how the situation in Syria will develop in the coming months. There is no guarantee that Mr Brahimi's efforts will be successful.

President Assad's speech last week urged the Syrian people to unite in a "war" against his opponents. Given the regime's intransigence and brutality there is a serious risk that the violence will indeed worsen in the coming months. If that happens, the international community's response will have to be stepped up.

So we will not rule out any options to save lives and protect civilians in the absence of a political transition in Syria. We will ensure that our efforts are legal, that they are aimed at saving life and that they support at all times the objective of a political transition and encouraging moderate political forces in Syria, and we will keep the House properly informed.

Fourth, we continue to increase our life-saving humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. The UK is the second largest bilateral donor to UN relief efforts, supporting more than 100,000 people across the region with food parcels, blankets and warm clothing. On 21 December my Right Honourable Friend the International Development Secretary announced a further £15 million in humanitarian aid, bringing our total support to £68.5 million so far.

Members on all sides of the House will have seen images of Syrian refugees struggling with rain and cold in refugee camps across the region, The latest £15 million pounds of funding will be used to provide food, clean water, blankets and shelter to help Syrians cope with the misery of these winter months, medical supplies to treat the sick and wounded since so many Syrian medical facilities have been destroyed, and armoured vehicles to enable humanitarian agencies to deliver aid safely inside the country.

The UN has appealed for $1.5 billion for the first six months of 2013. This is the largest ever short-term UN appeal, but it remains seriously under-funded.

At the donor conference to be hosted by Kuwait and the UN Secretary-General later this month we will again call on other countries to pledge the additional humanitarian aid that is desperately needed.

I pay tribute Mr Speaker to the twenty-six humanitarian workers who have been killed in Syria since the fighting began, and deplore the rise in attacks on medical facilities, which are contrary to international law and an affront to basic humanity. We urge all parties to stop the violence and allow humanitarian agencies to deliver assistance safely and without interference, in accordance with international law.

Fifth, we are continuing detailed planning for how we can help a future Syrian government with the many challenges Syria will face during transition. This process must be led by the Syrian people. But they will need help from the international community as they repair schools, roads and hospitals destroyed during the conflict, and restart their ravaged economy. Today we are hosting leading members of the Syrian opposition and representatives of 14 countries and international organisations at a Wilton Park conference designed to advance detailed planning of that support, including on political reform, security, institution-building and the economy.

And sixth, we are supporting UN efforts to document and deter human rights abuses in Syria. The Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Syria published their latest report on 20 December. It shows that the international human rights violations highlighted in its previous reports are continuing unabated. We will continue to do all we can to support their work. And we are providing specific leadership in efforts to confront rape and sexual violence in Syria. We've deployed experts to the region to provide training in how to respond to reports of sexual violence, to improve the prospect of future investigation and prosecutions, and we will intensify this work as a matter of urgency. We are also urging the Syrian National Coalition to commit themselves to ensuring justice and accountability for the Syrian people, including drawing their attention to the right of a future government in Syria to refer their situation to the International Criminal Court, even though some members of the UN Security Council are blocking that option at present.

So this is our approach: intensifying our efforts to forge agreement at the UN, pursing a political transition on the ground while ruling out no option to save lives if the situation deteriorates, supporting the opposition and the Syrian people, increasing the pressure on the regime and being prepared to do so in new ways if necessary, working to deter human rights violations and abuses, and planning to help Syria get back on its feet once the conflict comes to an end.

The Syrian people are enduring unimaginable suffering. They are at the heart of this crisis, their future is at stake, and our country and the world must not abandon them."

Further Information

UK hosts

conference on Syrian-led political transition.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-updates-parliament-on-syria