Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

UK response to developments in Syria

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Speaking today the Foreign Secretary said:

In recent days there have been several major developments relating to Syria. And I thought it would help the House if I provided an update on these developments before the House rises.

I will cover our objectives in three crucial areas: our response to the humanitarian crisis, our efforts on the political process including relations with the Syrian National Coalition, and our support for a strong international response to the use of chemical weapons.

First, we are determined to encourage and lead international efforts to alleviate human suffering in Syria and the region. The United Kingdom is the second largest bilateral donor to the humanitarian relief effort after the United States. The Prime Minister’s announcement at the G20 in St Petersburg of an additional £52 million in assistance brings our total support to £400 million so far, and we are encouraging other countries to do much more.

As a result of the meeting convened by the Prime Minister during the G20 Canada, Italy and Qatar have made new funding commitments, and ten countries agreed to lobby for unfettered humanitarian access for international humanitarian organisations inside Syria, and to provide medicines, contamination tents, and medical training against chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

Second, we remain committed to helping bring about a political settlement. The basis for a political solution was agreed in Geneva last year, namely the formation of a transitional government, with full executive powers, drawn from the regime and the opposition, by mutual consent. We are in close touch with our partners about convening a second Geneva conference to make this a reality. It is absolutely clear that no lasting or meaningful political solution can occur without the moderate Syrian opposition. The Syrian National Coalition has committed itself to a secular, democratic and pluralist Syria that ensures equal rights for all Syrians. That is a vision that the whole House and our country can support.

Last Thursday I held talks in London with the President and senior leadership of the Syrian National Coalition. We are providing more than £20 million in non-lethal support to the opposition, including 4x4 vehicles, body armour, generators, communications equipment, water purification kits and equipment to protect against chemical weapons attacks. This includes 5,000 escape hoods, detector paper, and a stock of nerve agent pre-treatment

tablets which have already been delivered. President Al-Jarba of the National Coalition and I discussed ways the UK could provide further non-lethal support to the opposition to help save lives, alleviate humanitarian suffering, provide services in areas no longer under regime control, and prepare for Geneva II.

This support is made all the more urgent by the appalling crimes being committed in Syria. The UN Human Rights Council's independent International Commission of Inquiry issued a harrowing report yesterday describing crimes against humanity and war crimes being committed by the regime and its forces, including indiscriminate shelling, sieges, massacres, murder, torture, rape and sexual violence, enforced disappearances, execution and pillage; and serious violations committed by some extremist anti-regime armed groups, which we also condemn.

On top of this, we have now seen mass murder inflicted by the regime's use of chemical weapons. So our third objective is to ensure a strong international response so that these barbaric weapons are not used again and that those responsible are held to account. The House debated this subject on the 29th August, and we have made it clear that we respect the view of the House.

The UN team is expected to report on its investigation into the 21st August attack early next week. We await their findings, but there should be no doubt in this House that all the evidence continues to point in one direction.

The Government confirmed last week that UK experts at Porton Down have tested samples from a victim reportedly treated as a result of that attack. Both the clothing and soil samples tested positive for sarin.

Human Rights Watch issued a report this week stating that based on its own independent evidence and assessment, "Human Rights Watch finds that Syrian government forces were almost certainly responsible for the August 21 attacks, and that a weapons-grade nerve agent was delivered during the attack using specially designed rocket delivery systems."

They went on to say: "The scale and coordinated nature of the two attacks…the presence of government-controlled potential launching sites within range of the targets; the pattern of other recent alleged chemical weapon attacks against opposition-held areas using the same 330mm rocket delivery system; and the documented possession of the 140mm and 330mm rocket systems able to deliver chemical weapons in the government arsenal—all point towards Syrian government responsibility for the attacks."

The international consensus that the regime was responsible is growing. During the G20 eleven nations including the UK signed a statement condemning the regime's use of chemical weapons and supporting efforts by the US and other countries to reinforce the

prohibition against chemical weapons use. A week later that statement has now been signed by 25 countries.

On Saturday I attended the EU Foreign Ministers' meeting in Vilnius, which unanimously agreed that there was strong evidence of regime culpability, and that "in the face of this cynical use of chemical weapons, the international community cannot remain idle".

This growing international pressure, including the threat of military action by the US, has had an impact.

On Monday I hosted Secretary Kerry for detailed discussions on the way forward. On the same day the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov announced that Russia would urge the Syrian regime to sign up to a proposal which would place their chemical weapons stocks under international control for destruction. In response, the regime announced that it supported the initiative and was ready to cooperate; and that it intended to join the Chemical Weapons Convention, open up its sites and give up its chemical weapons.

Given their track record, any commitment made by the Syrian regime must be treated with great caution. This is a regime that has lied for years about possessing chemical weapons, that still denies it has used them, and that refused for four months to allow UN inspectors into Syria.

Nevertheless, as the Prime Minister has said, we have to take this proposal seriously and test its sincerity. If the Syrian regime verifiably gave up its chemical weapons stockpiles this would obviously be a major step forward. We agree with President Obama that this initiative has the potential to remove the threat of chemical weapons without the use of force.

Intensive discussions are now taking place about how to achieve this, and Secretary Kerry is meeting Foreign Minister Lavrov in Geneva today to discuss the proposal.

Our diplomats in New York are in close discussion about a draft Security Council resolution, and the five permanent members of the Security Council met for consultations last night. A resolution must establish a binding commitment for the Syrian regime to give up its chemical weapons within a specific timeframe. We will hold further discussions in the Security Council once the UN inspectors have reported.

The United Kingdom will make every effort to negotiate an enforceable agreement that credibly, reliably, and promptly places the regime's chemical weapons stocks under international control for destruction.

The House should be in no doubt of the scale of the challenge and the immense practical difficulties that would need to be overcome:

It would require the genuine cooperation of a regime that denied until recently that it possessed these weapons and has used them ruthlessly against its own people on at least 14 occasions, killing many hundreds of people including women and children. The regime has a large number of sites – possibly the largest stock of chemical weapons possessed by any nation in the world – in numerous different locations in a country that is a contested battlefield. We would need to have confidence that all chemical weapons had been identified and secured and that they could not fall into the wrong hands.

These issues can all be overcome with sufficient international unity and goodwill, and provided there is a complete change of approach by the Assad regime to all of its past practices and deceptions.

So we will approach these negotiations with determination and resolve, knowing that if successful it would be an important breakthrough, but that overcoming all these issues will not be easy and that in the meantime thousands of Syrians are dying every month from conventional weapons in this worsening conflict.

It is abundantly clear that this diplomatic opening would not have come about had the international community shown complacency or disregard for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and that pressure on the regime must be maintained.

At the same time we will continue to do all we can to alleviate humanitarian suffering and save lives, we will support Syria’s moderate opposition, and we will make every effort to advance a diplomatic solution to a conflict that has now gone on for far too long.

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