Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on Africa and the Middle East

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Updating Parliament on the situation in Libya and the Middle East the Foreign Secretary said:

“Mr Speaker with permission I will update the House on recent developments in Africa and the Middle East.

Before I do so, I know members on all sides will join me in expressing sadness and outrage at the killing of seven international UN workers in Afghanistan this weekend. They put themselves in harm’s way to support a better life for the Afghan people. And I pay tribute to those who died and call for their killers to be brought to justice.

The House will also share our concern about the heavy loss of life in Cote d’Ivoire. The United Nations have confirmed at least 462 deaths and up to a million people have been displaced. I discussed the situation this morning with Jean Ping, who chairs the African Union Commission. The African Union has led mediation efforts. We are also in close contact with the rightful President Mr Ouattara. The Security Council will meet tomorrow to discuss its response. We call for an end to the violence, for defeated former President Gbagbo to step down, for all human rights abuses to be investigated and for the International Criminal Court to investigate the crimes which appear to have taken place.

We also remain in close contact with the small British community in Cote d’Ivoire. Since December our advice to British nationals has been to leave the country. France is leading on plans to evacuate nationals of EU nations if it becomes necessary. We have sent a Rapid Deployment Team to Paris, ready to be part of any evacuation, and consular officers in the region are on standby.

Mr Speaker, Britain continues to play its part in the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect civilians in Libya. 34 nations are now providing a range of assistance. NATO has assumed full operating capability over all military operations, and since Thursday a total of 701 sorties and 276 strike sorties have been conducted.

The coalition has all but eliminated the regime’s air defence capability and stopped it from bombarding Libyan cities from the air. We are destroying key regime military assets including

main battle tanks and mobile artillery. The arms embargo is being enforced. We have prevented a huge loss of life and a humanitarian catastrophe.

However the regime is still able to inflict considerable damage on Libya's civilian population using ground forces and indeed is deliberately inflicting such harm, particularly in the towns of Brega, Misrata and Zintan where the heaviest fighting is taking place. So long as the regime continues to attack areas of civilian population, the coalition will continue military action to implement the UN Security Council Resolution. We take every precaution to minimise the risk of causing civilian death and are seeking verification of incidents where this nevertheless may have happened.

We are one of over thirty nations contributing to the humanitarian effort in Libya. Food distribution is taking place at six locations in opposition held areas in the east of the country. The World Food Programme has over ten thousand tons of food positioned inside Libya and neighbouring countries and hopes to reach 85,000 people. DFID is flying tents for over 10,000 displaced people from its stocks in Dubai to be distributed by the Red Crescent. Several consignments of medical supplies have been successfully delivered to Misrata and yesterday a Turkish hospital ship was able to evacuate 230 wounded people.

A further British diplomatic mission has travelled to Benghazi led by Christopher Prentice. As I explained to the House last week we are not engaged in arming the opposition forces. We are prepared to supply non-lethal equipment which will help with the protection of civilian lives and the delivery of humanitarian aid. Given the urgent need of the Interim Transitional National Council for telecommunications equipment, the National Security Council has decided this morning to supply them with such equipment.

On Wednesday Libya's Foreign Minister Musa Kusa joined other prominent Libyan figures who have resigned their positions. He flew to the UK from Tunisia of his own volition, having notified our authorities shortly before his departure of his intention to travel here. In accordance with the EU travel ban he was refused formal leave to enter the UK but was granted temporary admission and met by officials.

Musa Kusa is not being offered any immunity from British or international justice. He is not detained by us and has taken part in discussions with officials since his arrival, of his own free will. Today my officials are meeting representatives of the Crown Office and Dumfries and Galloway police to discuss their request to interview him in connection with the Lockerbie bombing. We will encourage Musa Kusa to cooperate fully with all requests for interviews with law enforcement and investigation authorities, in relation both to Lockerbie as well as other issues stemming from Libya's past sponsorship of terrorism, and to seek legal representation where appropriate. As my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister has made clear, these investigations are entirely independent of government, they should follow the evidence wherever it leads them, and the government will assist them in any way possible.

Musa Kusa's departure weakens the regime and exposes its utter lack of legitimacy even in the eyes of those most closely associated with it in the past. It confirms that there is no future for Libya with Qadhafi in power. It is right that in these circumstances, when the Foreign Minister of a regime that is committing atrocities against its own people wishes to leave that country and to take no part in what is happening, that we should assist in that process.

We will treat those abandoning the Qadhafi regime in the following way. Any who travel to the UK to speak to us will be treated with respect and in accordance with our laws. Any immigration issues will be considered on their merits as with any other case. If our law enforcement authorities wish to speak to them about crimes committed by the regime, HMG will in no way prevent them from doing so. In the case of anyone currently sanctioned by the EU and UN who breaks definitively with the regime, we will discuss with our partners the merits of removing the restrictions that currently apply to them while being clear that this does not constitute any form of immunity whatsoever. We will begin such discussions at the EU this week in the case of Musa Kusa. Sanctions are designed to change behaviour and it is therefore right that they are adjusted when new circumstances arise. We continue to offer our full support to the investigations of the International Criminal Court.

The Libyan regime is under pressure. What is required from them is clear: a genuine ceasefire as set out by President Obama and others including our Prime Minister last month, an end to all attacks against civilians, the withdrawal of armed forces from contested cities and full access for humanitarian assistance. It is when these requirements of the UN are fulfilled that air strikes to protect civilians can stop. The world is united in believing that the Qadhafi regime has lost all legitimacy and that he must go, allowing the Libyan people to determine their own future.

We continue to pursue tough sanctions at the EU. Additional sanctions on five Libyan companies and two individuals are currently being discussed at the EU today, and if agreed will be in place on 12 April. We also continue to pursue additional sanctions with our international partners at the UN, and we hope to achieve agreement soon.

The first meeting of the Contact Group on Libya that was agreed at the London Conference last week will take place next week in Doha which I will attend. This will take forward the work agreed at the London Conference, maintain international unity and bring together a wide range of nations in support of a better future for Libya.

Elsewhere in the region, we remain very concerned about the political situation in Bahrain. It is vital for the future stability of the country that the Government and leaders from all communities work together to reduce sectarian tension and to create the conditions in which a National Dialogue can lead to real political reform.

In Yemen attempts at agreeing a political transition have repeatedly stalled or failed. There is an urgent need for steps to meet the legitimate demands of the Yemeni people, and we call on President Saleh to engage with the opposition and with the protesters in a way that meets these aspirations and avoids violence.

We are deeply concerned by further deaths and violence in Syria. We call on the Syrian government to respect the rights to free speech and to peaceful protest. We call for restraint from the Syrian Security Forces and for the Syrian authorities to investigate the deaths of protestors and bring those responsible to account through a fair and transparent process. We note the announcement of certain reforms and believe that meaningful reforms that address the legitimate demands of the Syrian people are necessary and right.

Mr Speaker, the United Kingdom believes that the people of all these countries must be able to determine their own futures, and that the international community must be bold and ambitious in supporting those countries that are on the path to greater political and economic freedom. That is why across the region we stand for reform not repression, and why in Libya, supported by the full authority of the United Nations, we are acting to save many lives threatened by one of the most repressive regimes of them all."

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