Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on the Middle East and North Africa

2011-10-13

He said:

“Mr Speaker, events in the Middle East continue to have far-reaching implications for the peace and stability of the region and of course for our own security.

Libya continues its profound transformation after more than 40 years of dictatorial rule. On 20 September the National Transitional Council took up Libya’s seat at the United Nations General Assembly. Order has been restored in Benghazi and Tripoli, as I saw when I visited with the Prime Minister last month, and the NTC has consolidated its hold on the vast majority of Libya’s territory.

The remaining Qadhafi supporters are concentrated in Bani Walid and in Sirte, where there has been intense fighting. The NTC has said that it aims to declare the liberation of Libya once Sirte has fallen, to move swiftly to form a Transitional Government within 30 days and to hold elections for a Constitutional Assembly within the following eight months. My Rt Hon Friend, the Defence Secretary visited Tripoli and Misrata last weekend. His talks with Libyan leaders confirmed their clear understanding of the need for quick formation of a new, inclusive government.

Colonel Qadhafi’s location remains unknown but scores of his closest supporters and family members, including his wife and daughter, have fled over Libya’s borders. INTERPOL has issued Red Notices for him, his son Saif Al-Islam and his former director of military intelligence, all of whom have been indicted by the ICC. No state should harbour any of these fugitives from justice.

Last week, NATO agreed that the positive trend in Libya is irreversible but that not all Libya’s population is yet safe from attack. We will continue operations to enforce UNSCR 1973 for as long as is necessary at the request of the NTC, and with the authority of Security Council Resolution 2009 which was unanimously agreed on 16 September and which also established a new UN Support Mission in Libya.

British planes and attack helicopters have flown some 3,000 sorties across Libya and have damaged or destroyed some 1,000 former regime targets. Their precision targeting has

minimised civilian casualties and saved countless lives, helping Libyans to gain their freedom. I pay tribute to them and all our partners involved in the NATO operation.

We are supporting the NTC's own plans for political transition in Libya, through the Friends of Libya group and the allocation of up to £20.6m in UK funding for stabilisation, including for the rule of law, police, elections, essential basic services, and the removal of mines and unexploded ordnance. Libya's economic growth will be an important component of its future stability and on 26 September the Minister for Trade and Investment my Nobel Friend Lord Green visited Tripoli with a trade delegation, followed by a conference in London for representatives of British business.

In contrast with the progress being made in Libya, appalling violence and repression continues in Syria. 2,900 people have died at the hands of the regime and its Armed Forces in just seven months, including 187 children. Along with the United States and our European partners we tabled a draft UN Security Council Resolution condemning the Syrian regime's use of force, calling for an end to violence and threatening sanctions while ruling out military force. Nine of the fifteen members of the UNSC voted in favour of this Resolution, but Russia and China regrettably chose to block it. It is a mistake on their part to side with a brutal regime rather than with the people of Syria.

We will go on working with other nations to intensify the pressure on the regime. On 24 September, the seventh round of EU sanctions came into force. They now target a total of 56 regime figures and 18 Syrian entities and include an arms embargo and a ban on the purchase, import or transport from Syria of crude oil and petroleum products. As the EU previously imported over 90% of Syria's crude oil, and in 2010 oil revenues accounted for a quarter of all Syria state revenues, the import ban will have a significant impact. We expect the EU to adopt further sanctions soon against a key regime entity.

Turkey has also announced plans to adopt unilateral measures against Syria. We will look to work with them and other like-minded partners to increase the pressure on the regime, as well as continuing discussions at the UN.

Too much blood has been spilled for this regime to recover its credibility. President Assad should step aside now and allow others to take forward reform. We urge the Syrian opposition to develop a peaceful vision for the future of their country, and welcome the formation of the new Syrian National Council in Paris. Yesterday My Honourable Friend the member for North East Bedfordshire met senior members of the Council, and I met Syrian activists in London at the end of last month. The Syrian Ambassador was summoned to the Foreign Office this morning and told that any harassment or intimidation of Syrians in our country is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Mr Speaker, there is no one model for democratic development in the Middle East. We must work with the grain of each society while standing up for universal human rights, recognising that the pace of change will vary in each country, and offering our assistance where we can and where it is requested.

On 23 October the Tunisian people will vote freely for the first time in their history. The Tunisian authorities have worked hard to prepare for elections. Tough economic challenges lie ahead for the new Government but they have achieved a great deal in the space of ten months.

In Egypt, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has announced Parliamentary elections beginning on 28 November to be followed by a referendum on a new Constitution and Presidential elections. I spoke to the Egyptian Foreign Minister last night to express our deep concern about recent unrest in Cairo, and to argue for the need for steps to avoid further tensions and uphold the right to freedom of religion and worship in Egypt.

Members of all sides of the House will have concerns about events in Bahrain, including the use of military-led courts to try civilian defendants including doctors and nurses. We welcome the announcement by the Bahraini Attorney General that the cases of the medical staff will now be retried in a civil court on 23 October, and the expected report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on 30 October. We attach great importance to the publication of this report. It is a major opportunity for Bahrain to demonstrate that it will adhere to international standards, meet its human rights commitments and take action when abuses are identified.

In Yemen, President Saleh's return without a clear plan to transfer power has worsened the severe economic, humanitarian and security crisis. We continue to work for and to urge an orderly transition of power, along with our Gulf partners and other allies. We are now seeking discussion of the situation at the UN Security Council.

The House will know that the United States has announced the disruption of a major conspiracy to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador on American soil in Washington. There are deplorable indications that this plot was directed by elements of the Iranian regime with the involvement of senior members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp's Quds Force. This would appear to constitute a major escalation in Iran's sponsorship of terrorism outside its borders. We are in close touch with the US authorities and will work to agree an international response, along with the US, the EU and Saudi Arabia.

Separately, we welcome the King of Saudi Arabia's recent announcement that women in Saudi Arabia will soon have the right to vote and run in municipal elections, and become members of the Shura Council, the King's advisory body. This will be a significant step forward for the people of Saudi Arabia, and I welcome the King's commitment to listening to the aspirations of the Saudi people.

I also welcome the progress that has been made in Morocco, where elections will be held on 24 November, and in Jordan where we look forward to the implementation of amendments to the Jordanian constitution, strengthening the rights of citizens and the parliamentary process. Positive peaceful change is taking place in much of the Arab world.

The case for progress on a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become more urgent as the pace of change in the region has quickened. We support a settlement with borders based on 1967 lines with equivalent land swaps, and a just settlement for refugees and Jerusalem as the capital of both states.

On 23 September at the UN General Assembly President Abbas lodged an application with the UN Security Council for full Palestinian membership of the United Nations. The Palestinian application is now being considered by the UN membership committee.

On 23 September the Quartet adopted a statement which provides a clear timetable for a conclusion to negotiations. We have called on both parties to return to talks on this basis. I welcome Baroness Ashton's statement on 9 October that the parties will be invited to meet in the coming days. Success in this will require bold, decisive leadership from both sides, as well as painful compromises. Palestinians should focus on talks, rather than setting too many preconditions.

For the Israelis, time is slipping away for them to act in their own strategic interest. Expansion of settlements must end. They are illegal under international law and an obstacle to peace. This is why we voted in favour of the UN Security Council Resolution in February on this subject and why we continue to condemn announcements of new settlements.

The Israeli Government need to take bolder steps than Israeli leaders have been prepared to do in recent years. Separately I welcome the agreement between Israel and Hamas to release the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit as part of a prisoner exchange. Holding him in captivity was utterly unjustified from the beginning and yet it has gone on for 5 long years, and the whole House will warmly welcome his return home.

The Government is determined Mr Speaker to do all it can to support peaceful economic and political reform across the Middle East and North Africa through our Arab Partnership Initiative, the work of our Embassies and our role in the European Union and the G8.

In Tunisia we are supporting voter education in rural areas. We are helping the government of Morocco to improve transparency in government departments. In Algeria, we are supporting a loans scheme for young entrepreneurs. In Egypt we are helping to establish an academy providing new female candidates and their election campaigners with relevant skills. We helped secure a revised European Neighbourhood Policy which makes an ambitious offer of much deeper economic and trade integration and more explicitly conditional financial assistance, and the G8 has pledged $38 billion for the region. In both cases, we want to see

policy turned into action so that the whole of Europe and the G8 can act as magnets for change. The Arab Spring has brought conflict and uncertainty, but it undoubtedly has the potential to bring about the greatest single advance in human freedom since the end of the Cold War.

We are also determined to learn the other lessons of these events. On 16 March I announced a Government review of policy and practice relating to the export of equipment that might be used for internal repression, in particular crowd control equipment. I have this morning laid a further

Written Ministerial Statement

before the House outlining a package of proposals resulting from that Review, which concluded that measures should be taken to improve aspects of UK export policy. We will introduce a new mechanism to allow Ministers to respond more rapidly and decisively to the outbreak of conflict or to unpredictable events like the Arab Spring, by suspending licensing. Our proposals also include steps to strengthen decision-making when we provide security and justice assistance overseas. This announcement does not preclude additional measures or further strengthening of the system.

Mr Speaker, on all these issues the government will continue to defend human rights and support political and economic freedom and to work closely with our allies in the interests of peace and stability for this vital region.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-updates-parliament-on-the-middle-east-and-north-africa