North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Joint press point

with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, Peter Pellegrini
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(As delivered)

So Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini,

It is a great pleasure and honour to welcome you here at NATO Headquarters. This is your first visit. Let me also congratulate you on your appointment as Prime Minister.

We discussed many issues during our meeting, we addressed the main topics as we prepare for the next Summit of NATO in July in Brussels. How to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence, how to project stability to our neighbourhood, and how to continue to modernise the Alliance And this is a response from the whole Alliance to a more demanding and unpredictable security environment which includes a more assertive Russia. And also the turmoil and violence we see in the Middle East and North Africa.

And I would like to start by thanking you Prime Minister for the many contributions Slovakia is making to NATO, to our shared security, to our collective defence. You contribute to our Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia, with your troops there.

You host what we call a NATO force integration unit, which is a small command which can coordinate exercises through planning and facilitate rapid reinforcements, deployments if needed.

I also welcome that Slovakia is making major contributions through different NATO missions and operations.

I recently visited Iraq where I met Slovak trainers that help train local security forces and also the fact that you have trainers and funding for the Afghan national security forces and army.

And on top of that you also play a part in Ukraine, Slovakia is the lead nation in a Trust Fund to help handling unexploded munitions.

So you play an important part and Slovakia is a highly valued Ally.

We also discussed the situation in Syria. We condemn in the strongest terms the use of chemical weapons.

The latest attack was horrendous, killing dozens of people, including many children.

We call on the Syrian regime and its backers to allow full and unimpeded access to international medical assistance and international monitoring.

NATO considers the use of chemical weapons a threat to international peace and security. And those responsible must be held accountable. We must do all we can to protect the ban on the use of chemical weapons.

Prime Minister,

Let me also strongly thank Slovakia for increasing defence spending, for investing more in our security. You brought your Deputy Prime Minister, Finance Minister Kazimir, and I think the fact that he was in the meeting just underlines the Slovak commitment to increasing defence investments. And we welcome your strong commitment to reach our goal of spending 2% of GDP on defence by 2024.

We also welcome the fact that Slovakia has already met the guideline of spending 20% of the budget on major equipment.

So Prime Minister, it's great to have you here and it's great to welcome you and I look forward to continue to work together with you. So once again, welcome.

OANA LUNGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: OK, we have time for a couple of questions. Lady over there, Slovak Television and Radio.

QUESTION [Slovak Radio and TV]: Good morning, Slovak Radio and TV. I would like to ask about the relation with Russia on two layers: one issue is the poisoning of Sergei Skripal. Have you discussed this case as well and what is also the stance of NATO, because NATO has sent… or has also ousted certain diplomats from NATO or they haven't extended their accreditation? Slovakia has recalled its Ambassador from Moscow, but we haven't cancelled the presence of any Russian diplomats. Have you discussed about steps to be taken in the future? And also, the current situation in Syria: the American President is considering a military response to the chemical gas attack. So, what is your take? What do you think about the situation? This is a question for both of you.

PETER PELLEGRINI [Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic]: During the meeting with the Secretary General, we have not discussed the Skripal case in the United Kingdom. Here, I'd like to emphasise one issue; that the position of Slovak diplomacy and the Slovak decision to recall our Ambassador from Moscow is an adequate response, especially adequate to our knowledge of the situation so far, and adequate of what we knew at that point in time.

On the other hand, I would like to also use this opportunity to reaffirm also, Mr Secretary General, that this hostile act of Russia cannot be taken… or the fact that we have recalled our Ambassador, this is… this by no means undermines our membership in NATO. We are a reliable and loyal member of NATO and we will continue to be such in the future. This was simply a decision that we have taken. There were many other decisions by other countries in

EU. We have taken a decision which we have taken, but this has no implication on our membership in NATO or on the relationship with our NATO partners.

Regarding Syria, we have discussed with the Secretary General that the priority is to first of all clearly refuse any tolerance of chemical weapons, especially used against civilians. And we have also conveyed a strong message against those perpetrators. But for us, as members of NATO, it is a priority to make sure that experts, expert teams will have a place to work, will have a chance to monitor and observe the situation in the field, on the ground, and will provide us with clear information from the place. And also, it is an absolute priority to make sure that international medical teams will have access and will provide first aid to those who were victims of these attacks.

Regarding your commentary to possible attacks of NATO members, well there is a discussion going on at the level of the Alliance, of what are the other possible venues to look for, apart from international experts and monitors, how else to react. But I am not going to comment any further on that.

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: The Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons published a report today and that report confirms the British findings on the nerve agent used in the Salisbury attack. And this is the first time that a nerve agent has been used on NATO territory. We use… we of course address this in a very serious way and we also have to understand that this attack takes… has taken place against a background of a pattern of reckless behaviour of Russia over several years: with the illegal annexation of Crimea, with the efforts to continue to destabilise Eastern Ukraine; different cyberattacks, and; also the fact that Russia has, in different ways, tried to interfere in our democratic, domestic processes. So, that was the reason why also many NATO Allies, and also NATO as an Alliance, decided to expel Russian officials, as a result of the… as a response to the Salisbury attack.

When it comes the situation in Syria, we are, as I said, extremely concerned. We strongly condemn the use of chemical weapons. Many civilians, many children have been killed, and we call on unhindered and full access for international monitors to the area, and also we strongly underline the importance of protecting the ban on the use of chemical weapons. And therefore, those responsible have to be held accountable after the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

OANA LUNGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: Last question. TASS.

QUESTION [TASS News Agency]: Thank you very much. TASS News Agency. Mr Secretary General, 15 years ago, the State Secretary of United States, Colin Powell, has said in the Council, or Security Council of United Nations, that Iraq had weapons of mass destructions which leads to disastrous invasion in this country and the… as an … [inaudible] the creation of the Daesh. So, are you not afraid that supporting the allegations of a chemical attack in Syria without clear verification mechanism, may lead us to more disastrous results? And are

you using the military-to- military communications lines with Russia to avoid such consequences? Thank you very much.

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: The attack took place in an area which is where the Assad regime and its backers are operating, and Russia and Iran provide strong support to the Assad regime. The Assad regime has used chemical weapons before. And one of the main messages we have, after the attack in eastern Douma is that we call for full and unimpeded access for international observers. And we call on the Assad regime, but also on its supporters, Iran and Russia, to make that possible, both to allow international observers, but also to allow the medical assistance access to the area.

Consultations are ongoing between NATO Allies on how to respond to the attack. We think it is important that those responsible are held accountable and we strongly believe that it's important to protect the ban on chemical weapons, because this is really an important convention which we all have to do our utmost to protect. So, the use of chemical weapons in Syria is not only serious because many civilians are killed, but it's also serious because it undermines the rules-based order, the convention banning nuclear… chemical weapons.

OANA LUNGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: Thank you very much. This concludes this press point.

PETER PELLEGRINI [Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic]: Thank you very much, once again.

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