Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Escalation of hostilities in Idlib, Syria: E3 statement

2019-05-13

Statement by the governments of the UK, France and Germany:

France, Germany and the United Kingdom are gravely concerned by the current escalation of hostilities in north-western Syria. Over recent days, the civilian population in the region has been under heavy shelling by the Syrian regime and Russia, with daily aerial raids and bombardments, while the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other terrorist groups designated by the UN have intensified their attacks. This military escalation must stop.

Over the last weeks, the violence has resulted in the death of more than 120 civilians. Airstrikes on population centers, indiscriminate bombardment and use of barrel bombs as well as the targeting of civilian and humanitarian infrastructures, notably schools and health facilities, are blatant violations of International Humanitarian Law. We condemn these in the strongest terms. It is particularly worrying that at least in some cases these attacks happened despite the fact that the coordinates were communicated to ensure the safety of these locations.

The sizeable presence of UN-designated terrorist groups in northwestern Syria, including ISIS and al-Qa’ida affiliates, remains of grave concern. However, the current brutal offensive by the Syrian regime and its backers on millions of civilians living in the area is not about fighting terrorism. It is about pushing forward the ruthless reconquest by the regime.

This violence only adds to the dire suffering of the Syrian people in the Idlib and Hama region. Large numbers of civilians have been forced to flee their homes due to the escalation, with reports of more than 180,000 newly displaced persons over the last two weeks. This region is home to three million civilians, including one million children. Many of them have already been displaced several times due to the brutality of the Syrian regime. Any military offensive in this densely populated region would lead to a humanitarian and security disaster.

Therefore, we urge all the parties to avoid any military offensive in the region and abide by their commitments to de-escalate violence in Idlib. In Istanbul, the heads of state and government of Russia, Turkey, Germany and France committed themselves to a lasting ceasefire in Idlib while underlining the necessity of fully implementing the measures foreseen in the Russian-Turkish agreement. This is paramount, to ensure the protection of civilians and safe and unhindered humanitarian access to alleviate their suffering.

Such escalation jeopardizes the prospect of a lasting political settlement. Only a credible, negotiated political solution, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, can end the conflict in Syria.

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Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/syria-e3-statement-on-the-escalation-of-hostilities-in-idlib