Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Our military action will degrade the Syrian regime's chemical weapons use: statement by Karen Pierce

2018-04-14

Thank you Mr President.

Mr President, these are uncertain times and today we deal with exceptional circumstance. Acting with our American and French allies in the early hours of this morning, the United Kingdom conducted coordinated, targeted and precise strikes to degrade Asad’s chemical weapons capability and deter their future use.

The British Royal Air Force launched Storm Shadow missiles at a military facility some 15 miles west of Homs where the regime is assessed to keep chemical weapons in breach of Syria’s obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention. Full assessment has not yet been completed but we believe the strikes to be successful.

Furthermore, none of the British, US or French aircraft or missiles involved in this operation were successfully engaged by Syrian air defences and there is also no indication that Russian air defence systems were employed.

Our action was a limited, targeted and effective strike. There were clear boundaries that expressly sought to avoid escalation and we did everything possible, including rigorous planning, before any action was undertaken to ensure that we mitigated and minimised the impact on civilians. Together our action will significantly degrade the Syrian regime’s ability to research, develop and deploy chemical weapons and deter their future use.

The UK Prime Minister has said we are clear about who is responsible for the atrocity of the use of chemical weapons. A significant body of information including intelligence indicates the Syrian regime is responsible for the attack we saw last Saturday. Some of the evidence that leads us to this conclusion is as follows:

There are open source accounts alleging that a barrel bomb was used to deliver the chemicals;

Multiple open source reports claim a regime helicopter was observed above the city of Douma on the evening of 7 April. The opposition does not operate helicopters nor does it use barrel bombs;

And reliable intelligence indicates that Syrian military officials coordinated what appears to be the use of chlorine in Douma on 7 April. Mr President, no other group could have carried out this attack. Indeed Da'esh, for example, does not even have a presence in Douma.

The Syrian regime has been killing its own people for seven years. Its use of chemical weapons, which has exacerbated the human suffering, is a serious crime of international concern as a breach of the customary international law prohibition on the use of chemical weapons and this amounts to a war crime and a crime against humanity. Any state is permitted under international law, on an exceptional basis, to take measures in order to alleviate overwhelming humanitarian suffering. The legal basis for the use of force for the United Kingdom is humanitarian intervention which requires three conditions to be met.

Number one, that there is convincing evidence, generally accepted by the international community as a whole, of extreme humanitarian distress on a large scale requiring immediate and urgent relief. I think the debates in this Council and the briefings we have had from OCHA and others have proved that.

Secondly, it must be objectively clear that there is no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved. I think the vetoes have shown us that.

And thirdly, the proposed use of force must be necessary and proportionate to the aim of relief of humanitarian suffering. It must be strictly limited in time and in scope to this aim. And I think we have heard both in my intervention in Ambassador Haley's how that has also been met.

The history of the Syrian conflict is a litany of threats to peace and violations of international law. The Security Council has met 113 times since the Syrian war started. It was therefore not for want of international diplomatic effort that we find ourselves in this position today.

After pattern of chemical weapons use since the outbreak of the conflict, Asad defied the international community in 2013 by launching a sarin gas attack on Eastern Ghouta which left more than 800 people dead. Despite the adoption of Resolution 2118, despite four years of patient engagement, Syria continues to use chemical weapons against its people and has failed to answer a long list of serious questions. The only conclusion we can reach is that Syria had not declared or destroyed all of its chemical weapons despite its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

This is not assertion on our part but a matter of record and I draw the Russian Ambassador's attention to his points about Barazan and Jimrya. The Organisation of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) still has unanswered questions and discrepancies. He knows this. We all know this. The Council was briefed by the OPCW Director General.

Resolution 2118 decides in the event of non-compliance to impose measures under Chapter 7 of the Charter. Yet on 28 February last year when the UK, together with France, proposed a Resolution taking measures under Chapter 7, short of the use of force, Russia vetoed. The very least this Council should have been able to do Mr President, was to follow up on the findings of the JIM report by extending its mandate. Yet four times Russia has vetoed different proposals from different Council Members to do just that.

The Syrian regime and it supporters are responsible for the gravest violations of international humanitarian law in modern history. They have used indiscriminate weapons, notably barrel bombs and cluster munitions, against civilians and they have deliberately targeted medical facilities and schools as well as humanitarian personnel and civilian objects. They have used sieges and starvation as methods of warfare accompanied by attacks on opposition-held civilian areas.

The regime has persistently obstructed humanitarian aid and medical evacuations. Tens of thousands of people have been illegally detained, tortured and executed by the regime. This is one of the most serious challenges to the international non-proliferation regime we have ever faced. A State party has violated the Chemical Weapons Convention. It has defied the Security Council and it has broken international law.

Repeated attempts over several years to hold them to account have been met with Russian obstruction and resistance. We have repeatedly, in this Council, attempted to overcome this obstruction without success. Mr President, we are faced with the litany of violations, no sense of guilt, no sense of regret, no sense of responsibility, a shameful record, wrapped in a mix of denial, deceit and disinformation.

Mr President, I would invite those like the Russian Ambassador who speak about the Charter to consider the following: It is hard to believe that it is in line with the principles and purposes of the Charter to use or condone the use of chemical weapons and in the United Kingdom’s view, it cannot be illegal to use force to prevent the killing of such numbers of innocent people. I will take no lessons, Mr. President, in international law from Russia.

Despite all this Mr. President we would like to look forward. The United Kingdom, together with France and the US, will continue to pursue a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian crisis. My French colleague will say more about our work in a few moments. We believe it must comprise four elements.

One, Syria’s chemical weapons program must be ended and the chemical weapons stockpiles destroyed once and for all.

Two, there must be an immediate cessation of hostilities and compliance with all Security Council Resolutions and these include those which mandate humanitarian access.

Three, the regime must return to the Geneva talks and agree to engage on the substantial agenda put forward by the UN Special Envoy Stefan de Mistura.

Four, finally, there must be accountability for the use of chemical weapons and other war crimes in Syria.

Mr. President, the Secretary-General rightly highlighted the political process. We propose that as the Security Council will all be together next weekend in the retreat with the Secretary-General, very kindly hosted by Sweden, that we should use that opportunity to reflect on next steps and the way back to the political process.

And with our allies, we stand ready to work with all members on the Security Council towards this end.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/our-action-will-degrade-the-syrian-regimes-chemical-weapons-use