High Level Group on Syria – Meeting in Rome 28 February. Consolidate coalition activity, says Terzi

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Italy is once at the centre of the international diplomatic effort to resolve the Syrian crisis. The spotlight will be on Rome next Thursday, 28 February, for the meeting of the “High Level Group on Syria” organised by Italian diplomacy at the request of the new US Secretary of State, John Kerry. Taking part will be the 11 countries most closely involved in handling the Syrian crisis, and representatives of the opposition to Damascus.

Firm platform now exists as alternative to Assad

“The request was made because Washington has seen the continuity and keen focus with which the Italian Government has been following the Syrian crisis for over a year in a successful effort to help the somewhat nebulous opposition find common ground”, explained Terzi to the Corriere della Sera newspaper. “A firm platform now exists”, he added, “which represents an alternative to Assad in terms both of proposals and of personnel. But we need to seek a political solution to the carnage. […] The Americans acknowledge the urgent need to resolve the crisis”.

Technical assistance and training

In Rome, Italy and the European countries’ proposal to the United States will be for “greater flexibility” in measures supporting the opposition to Assad’s regime. Most notably, they will ask for the “non-lethal” military aid to be extended to include technical assistance and training, in order to “consolidate the activity of the coalition”, following the lines of the latest EU Foreign Affairs Council, explained Terzi.

As regards the opening of negotiations, Terzi’s opinion is that “the talks could start even while Assad’s regime is still in place, with the involvement of Russia and China, with a view to phasing out the regime. In other words, the dictator’s departure would be the end point rather than the starting point” continued the Minister. But, he added, “it’s hard to imagine negotiations starting while bombing and massacres are still going on, refugees are fleeing the country and the prisons are full. We need to see signs of good faith”.

EU extends sanctions

The international community has recently renewed its calls for Assad to agree to speak to the opposition. And the European Union has extended the sanctions against the regime, which were due to expire on 28 February, by 3 months. A signal that arrived while from Geneva the UN Human Rights Council was publishing a report pointing to “individuals in leadership positions” as being responsible for crimes, and calling for the intervention of the International Criminal Court.

Once again, this week has been marked by violence in Syria, with one of the most bloody attacks since the start of the crisis taking place in Damascus on Thursday 21 February. Two car bombs caused over 60 deaths and hundreds of injuries. The crisis is worsening on the humanitarian front too, while the funds allocated to address it have thus far been insufficient. UNICEF has launched an appeal for 68 million dollars to tackle the problems involving water supply, sanitation, food supplies and psychological support. It warned that less than 20% of the amount needed has been covered. And those paying the heaviest price of the conflict are children, who have been arrested, mutilated and killed.

New humanitarian aid from Italy.

And Italy is playing its part on the humanitarian front too. Acting on Minister Terzi’s instructions, Italian Development Cooperation has sent a new consignment of humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees to the Syrian-Turkish border. This confirms Italy’s position as the second European donor for 2013, with 22 million euros earmarked in addition to the 7.5 million allocated thus far.

Source :
https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/2013/02/20130222_siria_riunione_roma/