Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"We must speak with one voice to condemn the use of chemical weapons"

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Thank you Mr President, and may I say I am grateful to our briefers for their clear explanation of the facts this afternoon. And I want to thank the Head of the Leadership Panel and, through him, his whole team for their committed, impartial, and expert work over the last five months investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

As we have heard so clearly today, those investigations have reached a clear, unmistakable conclusion. Syria, a member state of the United Nations and a Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention, has used chemical weapons against its own people.

The use of these weapons by anyone, anywhere is unacceptable, and we condemn their use by both the Syrian regime and by Daesh. These are weapons that over 190 states have come together to outlaw, weapons that have no place in the world today.

And yet, Mr President, we have been here before. Last year we were told by the Joint Investigative Mechanism that the Syrian regime had carried out three poison gas attacks and that Daesh had used sulphur mustard.

And yet some on this Council doubted the conclusions of that investigation; an investigation that they themselves had set up, the methodology they had approved. In February this year, action in this Council was vetoed.

We now have another report from independent UN experts mandated by this Council. It sets out a clear conclusion. On 4 April, the Syrian regime used sarin against its own people in Khan Sheikhoun, just five weeks after this Council was prevented by Russia from taking action on Syria’s use of chemical weapons.

The Joint Investigative Mechanism has done what we, as a Council, asked it to do. It has done so thoroughly, impartially and professionally. And today, presented with its findings, we must speak with one voice to condemn the use of chemical weapons by Daesh and this attack on Khan Sheikhoun by the Syrian regime. We must hold those responsible to account.

But experience to date suggests that we will not be able to do that. Russia continues to deny what happened. Since the attack on that morning in April, Russia has advanced a contradictory series of hypotheses and claims, moving from one to the next, as soon as it is

proven untrue, as it seeks to prevent this Council holding the Assad regime to account. Faced with science and fact, Russia has had no answer but fantasy and fiction, and has provided no evidence for its claims.

The investigators have looked at the evidence. In their report, they set out the rigour with which they have approached their task: how they have received information from twelve member states including the Syrian regime itself, how they have scientifically corroborated that information, how they have consulted numerous independent experts and scientists.

The JIM reached its conclusions not on the basis of any one single piece of evidence, rather, it built its case on the totality of evidence available to it, as any professional, rational investigation would do.

And those conclusions are clear. Aircraft of the Syrian Air Force were in the vicinity of Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April between 6:30 and 7:00 am, at the time munitions were dropped on the town. The crater from which the sarin emanated was created by an aerial bomb dropped on 4 April. And most tellingly of all, sarin found at the scene, in samples supplied by the Syrian regime, contained the same unique signature found in the chemicals handed over by the Syrian regime to the OPCW in 2014.

Mr Mulet, the Russian representative suggests sarin can be easily made or homemade. Could you please explain just how complex it would be to recreate that sarin exactly to the unique chemical signature of the Syrian regime?

In 2013, Russia promised the world that Syria would abandon all of its chemical weapons. Today, to the cost of the people of Syria, and to the cost of the international consensus against chemical weapons, that promise remains unfulfilled and Russia continues to protect Assad and his regime.

So I call on the whole Council to renew the JIM’s existing mandate, which has delivered the rigorous and conclusive findings we are discussing today. There is more work to be done; the OPCW Fact Finding Mission has now reported evidence of likely sarin use in nearby Ltamenah on 30 March. We need to support the JIM and to enable it to carry out its important work.

The resolution Russia has circulated today is not a serious attempt at renewal. It is a cynical ploy to discredit a professional, independent and impartial body. Russia is trying to shoot the messenger to cover up for the crimes of the Syrian regime.

And to the Syrian government, I say that evidence has been carefully gathered of the inhuman crimes you have committed. Russia is protecting you, for now, but the day will come when you are held accountable for your actions before international law and your victims will get the justice that they deserve.

Mr President, there is no middle ground in the United Nations Security Council when it comes to chemical weapons. We must condemn the use of these weapons in Syria, and support the JIM to identify those responsible. To do otherwise is to effectively condone these appalling attacks, and to undermine the international architecture that we collectively designed to stop them.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-must-speak-with-one-voice-to-condemn-the-use-of-chemical-weapons