Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Syria: 'It is the greatest regret of my time in New York that we failed to end the fighting and stop the humanitarian catastrophe in the region'

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Thank you Madam President for convening this debate today.

I welcome the powerful contributions of Under-Secretary-General Valerie Amos, the High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, Special Envoy Angelina Jolie-Pitt and Executive Director Ertharin Cousin. I am pleased that we are holding this meeting in an open format so that we can bring greater profile to the catastrophe facing the Syrian people and the region.

The plight of people displaced in Syria and the region is the greatest humanitarian crisis of our day. Four years of fighting have left Syrians among the poorest, most vulnerable people in the world. At the root of their suffering is Assad’s tyranny, exasperated more recently by the barbarity of ISIL and other terrorist groups.

In the past four years, we have also seen generosity – particularly from countries that have become a safe haven for refugees; Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey.

I will focus my statement on three ways that we can support these countries and the refugees who have found shelter in them.

First, we must address the immediate financial requirements of humanitarian agencies and governments in the region. Funding is simply not keeping pace with needs.

There are almost 4 million Syrian refugees in the region. All of them needed access to water, food, sanitation, and shelter when they arrived, and many need ongoing support. And I want to pay tribute to the work of host governments, to the UNHCR, to UNICEF, the World Food Programme and other agencies assisting the immediate needs of the displaced.

The $3.6 billion raised in Kuwait is a lifeline for such work, and we are grateful for Kuwait’s leadership. The United Kingdom is proud to have contributed $1.2 billion in recent years for the humanitarian crisis. But more is needed. Donors must disburse their pledges promptly to ensure that funds reach the agencies helping those most in need.

We must also recognise the enormous strain that is being placed on the resources of those accepting refugees. The United Kingdom is helping to build capacity in the education sector and supporting delivery of health and municipal services in Jordan. We call on all Members to lend their expertise to governments in the region.

Madam President,

Secondly, we must do all we can to help those who remain in Syria, and work together to bring peace to the country so that refugees can one day return.

No one here will underestimate the scale of that challenge. Assad's brutality knows no bounds and shows no signs of abating. One hundred years on from the first use of chemical weapons, Assad stands alone in his use of chlorine as a weapon against civilians. Shelling and barrel bombs continue to be weapons of choice and hundreds of thousands of Syrians remain under siege, deprived of basic services and food. And camps in Yarmouk, which remains besieged by Assad, and Dar ez Zour now lie exposed to the barbarism of ISIL.

Those responsible must be held to account. And the situation in Syria must be referred to the International Criminal Court.

We must do all we can to alleviate the suffering of those remaining in Syria. We call for all sides to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law. They must ensure free, unimpeded access for humanitarian agencies to evacuate the wounded and provide vital assistance to all those in need. We encourage the UN's humanitarian agencies and their partners to scale up humanitarian deliveries to besieged areas, including through cross-border routes. And we should look seriously at the further ideas that Valerie Amos set out earlier today.

The only sustainable chance of ending the humanitarian crisis lies in a negotiated political solution by mutual agreement of the Syrian parties, supported by the international community. The UN Special Representative, Staffan de Mistura continues to have our strong support and we look forward to his briefing this afternoon.

But Madam President, we must be realistic about the timescale of political change. So thirdly, we should consider what longer-term support we can offer the region. Establishing refugees' self sufficiency, supporting their education and fostering social cohesion with host communities are important steps. As Antonio Guterres pointed out, new financing instruments to support middle income countries affected by conflict should also be explored.

The United Kingdom is working with our partners on more efficient and cost-effective projects. In Jordan we have invested resources in water-supply and waste water infrastructure, mindful that it will not only provide a more cost-effective means of supporting refugees in the medium-term, but also a lasting asset for Jordan in the long-term.

The United Kingdom strongly supports the ‘No Lost Generation’ initiative that can provide sustainable, long term education and protection to children. We have given $140 million in support as we recognise that the futures of five million Syrian children are at stake. And we call on all Members to work with host countries to support access to services for refugees and ensure a durable settlement solution.

Madam President,

Today is my final day as the United Kingdom’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations. I want to thank all members past and present for their co-operation, their advice and their support over the last five and a half years.

But it is sadly fitting that I make my last statement to this Council on the tragic situation in Syria. It is the greatest regret of my time in New York that we failed to end the fighting and stop the humanitarian catastrophe in the region.

In the past four years I have seen four vetoes that have prevented the Council from taking meaningful action on Syria. And yet, I have also seen glimpses of what we can achieve when we are united. Three resolutions last year helped give access to thousands of those in need from across the international border. It can be done. But only if we put aside our narrow, national interests for the sake of the greater good and the future of the Syrian people.

It is this unity of purpose that you will all need to draw on in the coming months. I wish you every success in your efforts.

I thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/syria-it-is-the-greatest-regret-of-my-time-in-new-york-that-we-failed-to-end-the-fighting-and-stop-the-humanitarian-catastrophe-in-the-region