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Speech on Syria



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Since we discussed the situation in Syria last October the brutal repression has continued. The situation is dramatic and particularly worrying in Homs. The UN reports the number of victims has reached 5,000 people – and this may be a conservative estimate.

The situation is totally unacceptable. The brutal repression of civilians must stop. Assad must listen to his people, to his neighbours, to the Arab partners, to Europe, to the world. We all have the same message: he should stop the violence against his own people and let the transition begin.

Thousands remain in detention. The recent report of the UN International Commission of Inquiry indicates that crimes against humanity were committed by the security forces. Some people in Syria are taking up arms to defend themselves and the risk of widespread armed confrontation is increasing.

Against this difficult and complex backdrop, the EU has ratcheted up its sanctions and has done everything possible to build a growing international consensus to isolate the regime.

I have been in regular contact with the Arab League Secretary General Al Araby and hosted him at the last Foreign Affairs Council. The Arab League has our full support in their demands to the Syrian regime (including the immediate cessation of violence, withdrawal of the military from cities, and the granting of humanitarian and media access).

We have also backed their plan to dispatch an observer mission to protect civilians, offering our assistance and have welcomed their decision to impose sanctions. Regional leadership is key and should continue. The role of Turkey – with whom I have been in regular contact - and its decision to impose sanctions is also crucial to weaken the regime.

We have worked hard on the international scene, stepping up contacts with key international partners to isolate further the regime and its supporters. I have discussed this with Secretary Clinton in Washington, Foreign Minister Lavrov in Russia, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and with Foreign Minister Davutoglu in Bonn.

In the UN, successful efforts by the EU and Member States led to a resolution in the 3rd Committee of the General Assembly. A Special Session of the Geneva Human Rights Council was called at my initiative and a new resolution was adopted with unprecedented support in early December, establishing a Special Rapporteur for human rights in Syria.

Now all members of the UN Security Council must assume their responsibilities in relation to the situation in Syria. The EU and its Member States will continue to lead the efforts for a strong and united message.

The Syrian opposition has grown more active and is better organized over the last months. I have met this morning with a Syrian Human Rights activist and I know the role that this parliament has played in engaging with those activists and encouraging them in their work. I have also met other leaders of the Syrian National Council and welcomed the ongoing efforts by the Syrian opposition to establish a united platform and to work for a shared vision for the future of Syria and the transition to a democratic system.

We all agree on the importance of a strong and inclusive opposition political platform taking in all religious and ethnic communities. It is essential that the Syrian opposition maintains and develops its clear commitment to a peaceful and non sectarian approach.

The coordination with opposition on the ground to set out plans for the transition is of the utmost importance.

On the sanctions track our strong response to the Syrian regime's policy of repression has been further reinforced. Further individuals and entities linked to the regime have been added to the assets freeze and travel ban: 86 individuals and 30 entities are now on the list. At the beginning of this month, new measures were adopted to strengthen and complement the existing sanctions. In the oil sector, we have added a ban on the export of key technologies and equipment. In the financial sector, we have expanded the prohibitions on contacts with Syrian banks and we have also established a ban on export of monitoring software and equipment in the telecommunications sector.

Despite the efforts of everyone, the Syrian regime has remained defiant. None of the opportunities offered by the Arab League have yet been accepted. We think they need to comply fully with the Arab Plan of Action. They want to find excuses and dilute the effectiveness of an observer mission but the Arab League remains strong in their position.

Let me conclude with a word on the humanitarian situation. I believe It is increasingly worrying. Conditions are worsening in the places most badly hit by the violent repression and armed confrontations. These include cuts of electricity and water supplies, shortage of basic commodities (fuel, medication) in the areas most affected such as Baba Amr quarter in Homs.

Most recently, systematic denial of access has made it impossible to independently assess the situation. We are particularly concerned about the consistent reports of abuse related to the harassment of medical personnel and difficulties for wounded victims to safely access emergency health care. We have to assume that the information provided is correct, in the absence of free and unimpeded access for aid agencies to independently assess and respond to the most urgent needs.

DG ECHO is closely monitoring the situation from Damascus and was able to carry out a field mission in October. The ICRC continues to negotiate access to detainees.

We have made it clear that we are ready to provide emergency assistance should humanitarian needs be confirmed.

We are also recognizing the vulnerability of the Syrian refugees hosted by neighbouring countries, notably Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon and we are ready to support these refugees if the host countries request our help and we have made that knowledge available to them

I call on the Syrian authorities to allow humanitarian access without restrictions and across the country, so that Syrians in need can receive immediate assistance.

And I hope we'll see action in the Security Council: that all members will take their responsibilities, and respond to this and respond to what the UN Commissioner for Human Rights has said, with a great sense of urgency.