Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Syria: a situation that is accelerating and it's exponential

2019-06-18

Thank you very much Mr President. Thank you to both Under-Secretary's-General for that briefing. And through you, can I also pay tribute and thank all UN personnel on the ground in Syria and neighbouring countries, all humanitarian workers who are risking their lives to try and make the situation better for the ordinary people of Idlib and of Syria.

Mr President, I agree very much with a lot of what my colleagues have said today so I won't repeat it. Thank you to you, Germany and Belgium, for insisting on this session which is much needed. I won't go into the political process because the French Ambassador has said everything I would have said. So on this occasion he speaks for the United Kingdom also.

I wanted to start, if I may, with the situation against the Turkish observation posts and personnel in Idlib. They have been targeted by Syrian Regime shelling. I look forward to what our Turkish colleague can tell us later about that. But I just want to recall that Turkey has been one of the countries trying to help resolve the situation in Idlib. And the reward they get for that is to have their personnel fired upon. That's not just a sad commentary, Mr President, on the state of affairs in Syria, it's an absolute inversion of Member States' responsibility to contribute to the maintenance of international peace and security.

And as the Under-Secretary General said, the damage that is being done to Idlib and its civilians far outstrips any degradation or necessity in respect of terrorist forces like HTS and I think she referred to a pointless stalemate and that's exactly what it is, Mr President. People are being killed but no advantage is being gained at all militarily. And other speakers have drawn attention to the fact that there is no military solution. I agree very much with my American colleague on that.

So, along with the Polish representative, I want to call this out as a clear violation of the Sochi Agreement and to call for all parties to respect that Agreement and go back to the ceasefire. In fact, I have to say Mr President I find it incredible. President Putin agreed the Sochi agreement with President Erdogan. Why, therefore the Russian Federation cannot persuade the Syrian authorities to follow it – it's a mystery to all of us. But again it's an inversion of what ought to be happening. And I hope that when Special Envoy Lavrentiev and Deputy Foreign Minister Vershinin go to Syria this week, they will be able to press the Syrian authorities on this. And they will be able to have success.

Like other speakers, Mr President, I'd like to turn also to the situation against IHL and the situation of the bombing of the hospitals. This is a situation that is accelerating and it's exponential. And I look forward to what OCHA can tell us next week after their briefing. But in the meantime I'd like to hear some answers from the Russian and the Syrian Representatives here today. And I keep asking these questions, Mr President. I keep not getting answers but I'm going to carry on asking them because they're absolutely critical. And if people believe, as we'll hear later today, from both Representatives that they want to resolve this conflict - then they do need to begin to address these questions. So my first question is: are the attacks on hospitals deliberate? If they are deliberate, then I would be grateful for an explanation as to how such attacks meet the IHL core principles of distinction, necessity and proportionality.

And I'd also be grateful, Mr President, to know why no warning was given to the hospitals? Because under Article 19 of the Fourth Geneva Convention - the protection to which civilian hospitals are entitled shall not cease unless they used [outside their humanitarian duties] to commit acts harmful to the enemy. But the critical clause is: protection however may cease only after due warning has been given. Naming [in all appropriate cases] a reasonable time limit [and after such warning has remained unheeded]. So I would like to know, Mr President, if those warnings were given and if time limits were set and if not, why not? If, on the other hand the attacks on the hospitals are not deliberate, what steps are being taken by the Syrian and Russian authorities to avoid such attacks in future? What are the weaknesses in their deconfliction systems that are allowing the attacks to happen?

And my last question, Mr President, would be please can we know which units from both the Syrian military and the Russian military are involved in these attacks? I think that would be a very helpful piece of transparency for the Council to have. We, for the UK's part, will continue to provide significant humanitarian assistance to help keep people alive. But there's no doubt that restoring a ceasefire and ensuring that all parties respect it is actually the critical thing that needs to happen. And that is the thing, not the humanitarian assistance, that will make the biggest difference to the people in Idlib.

Two points on looking ahead, Mr President. I very much share what the French Representative said about reconstruction and elections. We provide humanitarian assistance. We will not provide reconstruction assistance. We will not be able to contribute to the eventual rehabilitation of Syria into the world community of nations - without a viable and meaningful and sustainable political process. And my last point, Mr President, again like France, will be to reiterate that if chemical weapons are used again against the civilians in Syria, we will join our colleagues in responding swiftly and appropriately.

Thank you.

Right of Reply by Mark Power, First Secretary, at the Security Council briefing on the situation in Idlib, Syria

Thank you Mr President.

My Ambassador has just asked me to take the floor - and she apologises that she had to leave the meeting - just to make a couple of final points on the substance of the issue today as opposed to some of the extraneous points that were brought in by some of the speakers. And those were going back to the strikes on the hospitals.

The Russian Ambassador asked us a question which was what the difference was between the hospitals that were attacked in the Syrian Government-controlled territory versus those that were attacked in rebel-held territory. And the difference is that in Idlib in the rebel-held territory, the Russians were supplied with the information about those medical facilities through the deconstruction mechanism we have been discussing today.

So the question remains - as was asked by my Ambassador - how it comes about that those hospitals and medical facilities have found themselves under attack - remains a legitimate one. And we further find it slightly astonishing that the Russian Ambassador was surprised that the number of hospitals had increased? During a civil war we think that this is a natural consequence of the attacks that have been taking place on civilians and therefore the reason why the mechanism was created in the first place. So to reiterate the point: we will answer our questions but will they answer questions that we have posed to them.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/syria-a-situation-that-is-accelerating-and-its-exponential