Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"The United Kingdom, with our allies, will continue to seek justice for the victims of chemical weapons attacks in Syria and elsewhere."

2017-04-05

Thank you Madam President.

On the 28th February, I asked a simple question of this Security Council. Will we take action against those who use chemical weapons in Syria?

We had a chance that day to pass a resolution doing exactly that; a resolution that would have taken action against the Asad regime and against Daesh proven to have used chemical weapons, by the mechanism which we set up.

We could have sent a clear message that day; a clear signal that there would be consequences for using these horrific weapons, for violating international law. A clear signal that there was Security Council unity– global unity against any use of these weapons. But after Russia and China vetoed, it seems the only message sent to Asad was one of encouragement.

And yesterday we saw the consequences of those vetoes. Those consequences are painted on the stricken faces of the children of Khan Sheikhoun, killed potentially by a regime that will stop at nothing to hold onto power. History will judge all of us for how we respond to these unforgettable and unforgivable images of the innocent, who had already suffered so much even before yesterday's attack.

How long are we going to sit here and pretend that actions in this chamber have no consequences; that vetoes have no bearing on the lives of innocent men, women and children?

Russia has said that the opposition is responsible. That a regime airstike struck an opposition depot for munitions. But we have seen nothing to suggest that any non-state actors in Syria have the sort of chemical weapons that would be consistent with the symptoms that we saw yesterday.

Russia will say simply that we don't have enough information about the attack.

And yet, we have every indication that this was a sustained attack using aircraft over a number of hours. We see all the signs of an attack using a nerve agent capable of killing over a hundred people, and harming hundreds more. If that is not enough to demand action, what is?

There is only one air force that has used such weapons in Syria. There is only one party to this conflict that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons says has, and I quote, “gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies”, close quote, in its Chemical Weapons Convention declaration; only one party that still refuses inspectors access to its facilities.

This doesn’t look like the work of terrorists. This doesn’t look like the work of the opposition. This bears all the hallmarks of the Asad regime and the use of chemical weapons is a war crime.

Make no mistake, this regime seems intent on making a mockery of the Russian-backed ceasefire. Russia has blocked Council action claiming that we might undermine the Astana process. Yet, the only thing undermining the Astana process is Asad; the very man they seek to protect.

Russia deployed the full weight of its armed forces to help him. They reduced Aleppo to ruins and displaced hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children all in the name of fighting terrorism. And what does Russia get as repayment? Asad humiliates Russia in the eyes of the world by intensifying his attacks, by reducing the Astana ceasefire to rubble. Asad humiliates Russia by showing just how empty Syria’s promise was to remove all its chemical weapons.

If Russia is to restore its credibility, they will need to join us in condemning this attack and in urging the OPCW to investigate it as soon as possible. They will join us in calling for the fullest support and cooperation for the investigation team. They will help, not hinder, our efforts to strengthen accountability through the vital work of the Joint Investigative Mechanism; there can be no further delay in fully staffing the leadership of that mechanism. They must have the right technical and analytical capacity to take on the task ahead.

If Russia fails to do so, if Russia falls back on its old ways, defending the indefensible, we will not be deterred. The United Kingdom, with our allies, will continue to seek justice for the victims of chemical weapons attacks in Syria and elsewhere. We will continue to pursue other avenues for action. European Union sanctions announced last month against Syrian military figures show that we can still take steps to hold individuals to account; that we can still show that use of chemical weapons brings consequences.

But until Russia changes its ways, this Security Council will remain blocked. That is the sad reality that the world has got used to. They view us as a table of diplomats doing nothing, our hands tied behind our backs, beholden to Russian intransigence.

But the world should be under no illusion; what Russia does in this chamber does not cause inaction; defending the indefensible causes suffering. Each and every abuse of their veto has consequences. For the people of Khan Sheikhoun, those consequences have been unspeakable.

So let me close by asking Russia, what is your plan? What is your plan to stop these horrific, senseless attacks? We had a plan, we had the support. And you rejected it to protect Asad. It's time now for you to stop blocking and start helping by joining Security Council consensus. Our draft resolution condemns this attack, and calls for consequences. All 15 Security Council members should be able to condemn this and every use of chemical weapons. We expect your unanimous support.

Thank you Madam President.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-united-kingdom-with-our-allies-will-continue-to-seek-justice-for-the-victims-of-chemical-weapons-attacks-in-syria-and-elsewhere