Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

# Foreign Secretary calls for strong international response to chemical attack in Syria

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The Foreign Secretary has provided an update on the day's activity regarding the response to the chemical attack in Syria. Speaking in a television interview, he said:

The National Security Council (NSC) met this afternoon. This is the body set up under the current government that brings together the Ministers responsible for every aspect of national and international security: the heads of the intelligence agencies, the Chief of the Defence Staff and so on, all the senior officials and Ministers in Britain responsible for national security.

We met this afternoon and we decided unanimously that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime is unacceptable and that the world can not stand by in the face of that.

The Cabinet will meet tomorrow to discuss the United Kingdom's response and the Prime Minister will present the Government's case to Parliament tomorrow as well.

In parallel with that, in New York, we have called together a meeting of the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council. We believe that it's time the United Nations Security Council shouldered its responsibilities on Syria which, for the last two and a half years it has failed to do.

And we have put forward to them a draft resolution which condemns the use of chemical weapons, which demands that the Assad regime cease to use such weapons and which resolves to do what is necessary to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people affected by chemical weapons attacks and try to prevent the further use of the chemical stock piles of the Assad regime.

I expect there will be further discussions in New York over the coming days but we have started those discussions about a UN resolution. By far the best thing would be if the United Nations could be united, unlikely as that seems in the face of the vetoes from Russia and China that we've had in the past. But we have to try to do that. We're clear that if there isn't agreement at the United Nations then we and other nations still have a responsibility on chemical weapons.

This is the first use of chemical warfare in the 21st century. It has to be unacceptable, we have to confront something that is a war crime, something that is a crime against humanity. If we don't do so, then we will have to confront even bigger war crimes in the future.

So we continue to look for a strong response from the international community that is legal, that is proportionate and that is designed to deter the further and future use of chemical weapons.

It is important to respond to what has happened. I think it's very important not to take so long to respond that people confuse what the eventual response is about. It's very important for a regime like the Assad regime to know that there is a clear response when they cross such an important line. As I say, this is the first use of chemical warfare in this century.

Speaking about the investigation into the chemical weapons attack by the United Nations team, the Foreign Secretary said:

The UN team are doing their work. As I said the other day, we have to be realistic about what they can achieve. It's not within their mandate to apportion blame, it is in their mandate to try to assess scientifically what has happened. I think we've been very clear from the outset, in the UK, about where the blame lies and that remains the case.

All of the evidence points in one direction, there is no evidence that any opposition group in Syria has the capability let alone the desire to launch such a large scale chemical attack.

So all the evidence points in one direction. It is because that is so clear, and because the UN team don't even have the mandate to apportion blame, that they need to complete their work speedily, so that the world can consider it speedily, for the reasons I've given.

Commenting on comparisons between the situation with Syria and Iraq, the Foreign Secretary said:

This is a very different situation from anything that happened over Iraq, I think we have to be clear about this. This is a situation now in Syria in which a hundred thousand people have died. There are two million refugees, chemical weapons have been used.

This is not a situation in which we are waiting for intelligence to see if certain weapons exist. The Assad regime acknowledges it has chemical weapons, there are previous instances over the last year when we believe it has used chemical weapons. There is no plausible alternative explanation for this other than that they have used chemical weapons.

It is a quite different situation from Iraq, an entirely different situation and our Government is going about it in an entirely different way with a National Security Council, with clear legal advice from the Attorney General and going to Parliament with the maximum information that we can provide.

So there is no comparison between this and Iraq. This is where a crime against humanity has been committed and there can be no argument about that and we have to decide whether the world responds to such a crime in such a way as to reduce the chances of it happening again.

Further information

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newsdesk@fco.gov.uk

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