Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary's remarks at Syria Action Group meeting

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In his remarks to the Syria Action Group meeting in Geneva today, the Foreign Secretary said:

“We face a heavy responsibility today. The world is looking to us for leadership and action to end the bloodshed and horror in Syria. We should heed the Secretary General’s words on this.

“We have a choice:

“We can unite around a robust and effective plan to achieve a ceasefire and a political transition in Syria and we can agree to give this plan the force and backing of a UN Security Council Resolution. Armed with that, we can launch a concerted attempt to halt the violence once and for all.

“Or, we can fail to overcome these differences, miss the opportunity to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough, and watch the situation deteriorate further. Of course, we benefit from having a six- point plan in front of us.

“The cost of any such failure would be counted by the people of Syria in lives lost and injuries sustained, livelihoods wrecked and suffering endured.

“I think it would embolden all those who think they can fight their way to victory, and give space for extremist groups to establish a foothold.

“It could turn a humanitarian crisis into a catastrophe.

“The Secretary General has already said he would need to withdraw observers.

“And it would be felt by the region in dangerous instability and the emergence of new threats.

“This would be against the interests of every country in this room, as well as the world as a whole.

“Achieving progress today requires us to move beyond previously agreed language and Resolutions. We cannot simply camp on previous texts, or recycle old statements. We need

concrete steps that will enable us to implement the Annan Plan and the plan for transition. Without this, there is no hope of changing the situation on the ground.

“For a plan of action to be credible, in the view of the UK, it requires five elements:

“First, it must set out a clearly defined timetable for irreversible steps to achieve a Transitional Government of National Unity and a new constitutional order. Such a timetable would give confidence and certainty to the people of Syria. It would impose obligations on all sides. And it would ensure that all members of this action group must have a shared understanding of actions which will flow from this meeting.

“Second, the steps that we agree today, and here I disagree with my colleague Sergei Lavrov, will require swift endorsement from the UN Security Council in the form of a Chapter VII Resolution. Without that and the prospect of penalties for non-compliance, there can be little credible pressure on the Syrian regime and other parties to change course. If we could get them to change course without a chapter VII resolution for acting together, we would have achieved this already. We believe that discussions on a text should begin next week and rapidly be concluded. All the P5 must shoulder their international responsibilities.

“Third, we think that transition can only begin with a genuine ceasefire. The onus is on the Assad regime to make the first move, as set out in previous UN Security Council Resolutions and the Annan Plan. The responsibility to end the violence is overwhelmingly theirs. And there is no equivalence between the organised army and security forces of a State, and civilians who have turned to arms to defend their homes with no barracks to withdraw to.

“Fourth, President Assad and his closest associates cannot credibly lead the process of transition in Syria. This is a statement of fact, reflecting reality now that so much blood has been spilt. Their failed leadership is now the prime cause of the instability and crisis in Syria. Their involvement would condemn transition to failure before it had begun, since it inevitably would be seen as an attempt to cling to power. Equally we must convince the opposition of the need to involve all sides in a Unity Government, and to preserve key state structures to prevent a security vacuum in Syria.

“Fifth, in our view the transition must involve representatives of all Syrian communities. I welcome the meeting of opposition groups in Cairo next week. We have an opportunity today to urge them to unite and to put forward principles which they can support. As part of a transition process there will also need to be accountability for criminal acts that have been committed. It will be for the Syrian people to decide how this should be addressed, but we are determined to ensure there is sufficient focus on this important issue.

“None of us seek military action in Syria.

“None of us seek to impose a solution on the Syrian people.

“None of us seek to change regional power structures, or affect long-standing national interests in Syria.

“I believe all of us wish to see a peaceful Syrian-led settlement, and a stable, sovereign and free Syria. I thank Kofi Annan and his team for their tireless efforts, and our Arab League colleagues for their continued leadership and resolve. In the guidelines you have put forward we would be giving them the opportunity to achieve this. The most effective way is to support Kofi and his team as we’re not going to have a better time to achieve this.

“It is time for all of us to act with urgency and determination, to create a roadmap to lead Syria back from the brink, and to insist on its full implementation. This is a sound plan with sound principles.”

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretarys-remarks-at-syria-action-group-meeting