Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary: "International unity" needed on Syria

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Speaking on Sky News this morning, Foreign Secretary William Hague said that international unity behind a plan of action and transition in Syria is the only way to bring the killings to an end.

Dermot Murnaghan (DM)

: Well as I say a very good morning to the Foreign Secretary William Hague. And it's fairly blunt question Mr Hague how many more civilians have to die before they're offered protection in Syria?

Foreign Secretary William Hague (WH)

: Well of course we're, we're doing what we can first of all on a humanitarian basis to help people, you were speaking earlier about the number of people need aid assistance of one sort or another. One of the great difficulties here is getting aid to them where fighting is going on and where the regime doesn't provide access. But the United Kingdom has already provided eight and a half million pounds of medical supplies, emergency supplies to get to those people we can get to through international agencies.

Now on the wider question then of, of where we go from this appalling situation where people are dying in large numbers on a daily basis we continue to do everything we can to get the international community together on this. It's one of the reasons I've been to Russia in the last two weeks, we continue to talk to the Russians and Chinese all the time because we want a stronger international position.

And I welcome the, I welcome in principle the Russian proposal for an international conference but, of course, it would have to be a conference that would really lead to a change not just buy time for the regime to kill more people. Now that is the way forward, to implement the Annan plan, to have international support for it, that is the way to reduce the number of killings most effectively rather than increase the number of killings through even greater violence.

DM

: Okay there's a lot in that I want to probe further on. First of all on that conference proposed by the Russians, an international conference and they say including Iran.

WH

: Well that's one of the difficulties of course, Hillary Clinton has said from the United States point of view it would be unacceptable to have Iran there. I've said that it would be hard to see how it would be workable with Iran there because we want to know that if a conference was held it would lead to progress, it would be likely to lead to a political transition in Syria that it wouldn't just be, as I say, for the regime to buy time.

Now Iran is a country that has actively supported the Assad regime, we know they've given them technical support, they've given them advice on how to suppress protest and they probably support them in many other ways that we can't see. So a country there at the table that is there just to preserve the Assad regime and thereby continue the killing wouldn't be a very good basis for such a conference.

But of course we will keep talking to the Russians about how we can do this because international unity behind a plan, behind an actual plan of action and a transition in Syria is, as I say, the, the only way to actually bring the killings to an end. Every other solution of any kind to the Syrian crisis involves a lot more deaths.

DM

: But if, and of course it's a major if, you get the Russians and the Chinese onside where do you envisage things going from there? That aid you talk about for instance would that be delivered to a protected population by perhaps armed forces from NATO countries?

WH

: Well if we had international agreement on insisting on the Annan plan being implemented then, of course, there would be access to the whole of Syria for monitors who are currently being shot at by supporters of the regime to, to monitor a ceasefire. Armed forces would be pulled back from populated areas in Syria, a political process in which Syrians could decide their own future would begin and there would be access to the whole country for aid agencies. Now questions of, of the kind you're asking arises if we can't do any of that then what do we do, what if the Annan plan fails completely because clearly time is now running short. For the meantime we have to continue to try to achieve a united position with Russia on the way forward. If all of that fails of course we will be returning to the Security Council for further measures, we'll be asking all the countries in the Friends of Syria to step up the isolation of the regime, we would be greatly increasing further our support for the opposition, but all of that I think would be second best to an agreed way forward.

DM

: But I mean you do agree with the Russians on, on many points about Syria don't you? I mean you agree of course about the issue of, of aid. You agree in terms of the analysis of the situation as Sergei Lavrov says Syria is a complicated multi confessional state. It is, it is very difficult to intervene there. Do you agree with them that military intervention is eternally out of the question?

WH

: Well I think we don't know how things are going to develop. Syria is as I've said in the last couple of weeks on the edge of a collapse or of a sectarian civil war and so I don't think we can rule anything out. But it, it is not so much like Libya last year where we had of course a, a successful intervention to save lives. It is looking more like Bosnia in the 1990s, being on the edge of a sectarian conflict in which neighbouring villages are attacking and killing each other. So I don't think we can rule anything out, but I think it does mean as, as you say in your question that there is, there's an increasing commonality of analysis with Russia, the Russians are concerned about that scenario I found out on my visit to Moscow. My Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov has said this weekend that the Russians are not wedded to Assad being in power. They just want Syrians to decide their own future. Well that's exactly what we want. But they can't decide their own future while they are being killed, their bodies burnt, the monitors shot at. So it requires Russia to use its leverage to say to the Assad regime you have to follow the Annan plan and if we call a conference together it will be about ensuring that such a plan is fully implemented so that there's a cessation of violence and a political process in Syria.

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