North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press point

by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg after North Atlantic Council meeting on Syria
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Good evening.

The North Atlantic Council has just met. France, the United Kingdom and the United States briefed Allies on their joint military action in Syria overnight. They also briefed on the additional, non-military measures taken to reinforce the Chemical Weapons Convention. The three Allies stressed that a significant body of information indicated that the Syrian regime was responsible for the horrendous attack against civilians in Douma on 7 April. Which killed a large number of children, women and men. They also made clear that their military action was limited to the Syrian regime's facilities enabling the production and employment of chemical weapons. They emphasized that there was no practicable alternative to the use of force.

All NATO Allies expressed their full support for last night's actions. Which was intended to degrade the Syrian regime's chemical weapons capability. And to deter further chemical weapon attacks against the people of Syria. NATO strongly condemns the repeated use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. Chemical weapons cannot be used with impunity. They cannot become normalized. They are an immediate danger to the Syrian people, and to our collective security. And those responsible must be held to account.

We call on the Syrian regime and its backers, Russia and Iran, to allow rapid, sustained and unhindered humanitarian access. NATO has consistently condemned Syria's continued use of chemical weapons as a threat to international peace and security. Such outrageous actions call for a collective and effective response by the international community. We support international mechanisms to establish responsibility and prevent impunity on the use of chemical weapons. We regret that the mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, to identify perpetrators of chemical attacks, was not renewed last year. Even though it was established by a Resolution of the United Nations Security Council three years ago.

Despite sustained diplomatic efforts, the Syrian regime's repeated use of chemical weapons against its own people has contributed to appalling human suffering since the start of the conflict. The use of such barbaric weapons is in flagrant violation of international standards and international norms. It is in breach of multiple United Nations Resolutions. And of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Syria ratified in 2013. A hundred years after the end of the First World War, we must do all we can to uphold, and not to erode, the Chemical Weapons Convention. NATO fully supports the efforts led by the United Nations to achieve a

lasting political solution to the conflict in Syria. We call on all members of the UN Security Council to uphold their responsibilities.

At the same time, we call on all supporters of the Syrian regime, notably Russia, to exercise responsibility to ensure that the Syrian regime participates constructively in the UN-led Geneva process. NATO remains committed to the Coalition to Defeat ISIS, of which we are part. Defeating terrorism in all its forms remains a key objective for our countries and a key challenge for the stability in the region.

And with that I'm ready to take a few questions.

OANA LANGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: We'll start with the BBC at the very end.

QUESTION [BBC]: Thank you. It's Adam Fleming from the BBC. How much of the chemical weapons capability has actually been degraded or destroyed in these strikes? I mean, in other words, could the regime still carry out another Douma even after these airstrikes?

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: The NATO Allies that conducted a strike last night, the United States, the United Kingdom and France, briefed us in detail about the strikes and they assessed that it was a very successful action and it has significantly degraded the capabilities of Syria to conduct chemical attacks. And at the same time, it had also sent a very clear message helping to deter any future use of chemical weapons. But I will leave it to the three Allies which actually conducted the airstrikes to comment on details when it comes to the outcome and the effects of the attack, but all NATO Allies welcome that three Allies conducted attacks which has degraded the capabilities of Syria to conduct chemical attacks.

Let me also underline that this is about making sure that the use of chemical weapons cannot be something that happens with impunity. It has to be reactions, it has to be a strong reaction from the international community and that's exactly what we saw last night.

OANA LANGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: Wall Street Journal?

QUESTION [Wall Street Journal]: Mr Secretary General, you've been out here several times in recent weeks, talking about the use of chemical weapons in attacks on people, both in the UK and now in Syria. Do you feel that the norms against the use of chemical weapons are weakening? You spoke about the need to strengthen deterrence in this. Do you feel that nations are more willing to use chemical weapons now?

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: The ban on the use of chemical weapons is under pressure because we have seen several examples of state actors, Syria, using chemical weapons, and that's also the reason why we have to uphold and support the ban on chemical weapons, and not erode it. And that's exactly why NATO Allies strongly condemn any use of chemical weapons and that's also why all NATO Allies support the actions taken by three Allies last night.

It is important, especially a hundred years after we saw the barbaric effects of chemical weapons used not far away from Brussels, in Flanders fields, where chemical weapons were used during the First World War, to do whatever we can to support, to uphold the ban on chemical weapons. So, that's exactly what the actions last night helped to do and that's exactly also why we will continue to work to strengthen the Chemical Weapons Convention.

OANA LANGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: NRK, in the centre?

QUESTION [NRK]: Secretary General. If the proof is in the pudding, so to say, what have you… what is in the pudding? What have you been able to see? What kind of evidence has been shared with you and why are you convinced, based on this evidence, that this was a correctly timed and correctly carried out attack?

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: We were briefed by the three Allies. They have provided a lot of information. We have no reason to doubt the assessments and the findings of our Allies, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. We also have to understand that the chemical attack took place in an area where the Assad regime forces are operating, supported by Russia and Iran. We have seen that the Syrian regime, the Assad regime has used chemical weapons before. We have seen multiple open sources confirming the use of chemical weapons and also the World Health Organisation has confirmed that chemical weapons were used.

So, all of this creates a picture which is more than enough for us to support the actions conducted by three NATO Allies last night. There have also been of course consultations between NATO and many NATO Allies since the attacks on 7th April. I was also briefed by Secretary Mattis last night, before the attacks, and we have also been of course in close contact with both the United Kingdom and France over the last days.

OANA LANGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: Al Arabiya in the centre?

QUESTION [Al Arabiya New Channel]: Mr Secretary General, you describe the last night military operation as a successful operation. Do you believe after the briefing that you had with the… from the three states that the stockpile of chemical weapons has been destroyed and there is no more need for further military attacks against the Syrian regime? And don't you think that this limited operation may complicate the search for a political solution? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: The last… I didn't get the last question.

QUESTION [Al Arabiya]: Don't you think that the… this military operation, even if it is a limited one, may threaten the search for a political solution by the United Nations?

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: No. Actually on the contrary, I think if we had just been silent and accepted the use of chemical weapons, it will had undermined the efforts to find a political solution. So, we strongly express support for a UN-led political

process. There is no military solution to the conflict in Syria, but at the same time I think it really will be dangerous if the international community accepts use of chemical weapons. And therefore we support the actions taken last night, which were very targeted, measured and proportionate, and actually targeted at chemical weapon facilities.

We have been briefed by the Allies that conducted these strikes that they assessed them as very effective. They have been able to degrade the capabilities of the Syrian regime, and we are of course glad and we welcome the detailed briefs we have received from our Allies on the effect of the attacks.

QUESTION: [ITAR-TASS, Denis Dubrovin]: Thank you very much. Mr Secretary General, has United States explained why they decided to strike today, on Saturday, when the group of the international inspectors from the Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have just arrived in Syria to verify all the details of the presumed chemical attack? And a second question, whom do you intend to bomb in case the information about this chemical attack would be proven to be wrong? Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: We welcome the fact that the Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, OPCW, is on the ground in Syria. We have been calling for that for a long time. But it is important to understand the difference between OPCW and an independent investigation, because the OPCW doesn’t have a mandate to attribute, to say who's behind the attack. They can provide analyses, assessments, about whether a chemical attack has taken place, but they cannot attribute who is behind. That’s exactly… and who is responsible… that’s exactly why NATO Allies in the Security Council, and all NATO Allies, have supported repeated calls and repeated initiatives to have an independent investigation into the chemical attacks in Syria. And these initiatives have been blocked again and again by Russia, by using the veto in the Security Council. So, actually before the attack took place… sorry, before the strikes took place last night, the NATO Allies exhausted all other possible ways to address this issue through the UN Security Council, by diplomatic and political means.

But since this was blocked by Russia, there was no other alternative than to react the way they reacted this night.

OANA LANGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: Politico, last question?

QUESTION [Politico]: David Herszenhorn with Politico. Two quick questions: this is not the first time we're here. A little more than a year ago, President Trump ordered strikes because of a chemical attack. Understanding your point that there needs to be an answer from the international community, what gives you any reason to believe that this restrained, limited strike won't have us back here again in six months or a year, when there's another reason that the Assad regime may see for using chemical weapons? And also, can't help but notice that you have Russia on the mind. To what extent do you hold Moscow responsible for the

attacks that took place, the use of chemical weapons, which they had obviously committed to removing in Astana?

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: So, Russia provides supports to the Assad regime and they have done that again and again, and they continue to do so. And in the area where the chemical weapon attack happened, or took place, on 7th April is near where Assad regime operates with support of Russia.

The attacks last night degraded the capabilities of Syria to conduct new attacks. And, at the same time, it sends a clear message which deter further attacks. But of course, we will never have a total guarantee against new attacks, as long as we have regimes or state and non-state actors which are willing to use chemical weapons. That’s exactly the reason why we need to continue to work hard to protect and uphold the ban on chemical weapons. War and weapons is barbaric, but chemical weapons are in particular barbaric and that’s the reason why we have a specific ban on chemical weapons.

And if the international community just accepted the use of chemical weapons without doing anything it would be obvious that we would have risked escalation and more and more use of chemical weapons. So, I'm not saying that the attacks last night solve all problems, but compared to the alterative, to do nothing, this was the right thing to do. It deters further attacks, it degrades the capabilities of the Syrian regime to conduct new attacks, and it's a way to support the ban on chemical weapons.

OANA LANGESCU [NATO Spokesperson]: Thank you very much. This concludes this press point. Thank you.

JENS STOLTENBERG [NATO Secretary General]: Thank you.

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