Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"The situation across the Middle East gives us all cause for grave concern"

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Mr President,

The situation across the Middle East gives us all cause for grave concern. Violence and humanitarian crises have escalated and engulfed millions of innocent people in the region.

It is deeply tragic that so many have been killed and injured in the current crisis in Gaza. We urge both sides to do their utmost to deescalate the situation and to avoid further injury and loss of innocent life. The people of Israel have the right to live without constant fear for their security, but the people of Gaza also have the right to live safely in peace.

We condemn the rocket attacks on Israel, targeting civilians in contravention of all humanitarian law and norms. We deplore Hamas's rejection of ceasefire efforts to date. All those with influence over Hamas must use it to get Hamas to agree to end rocket fire and join an immediate ceasefire.

We fully support Israel's right to take proportionate action to defend itself from indiscriminate rocket attacks and attempts to infiltrate Israel through tunnels.

But it is vital that Gaza's civilian population is protected. The number of civilian casualties is now past 600. In particular, the military action in Shujaiyya on Sunday exacted a terrible human cost. Israel must do everything it can to avoid civilian casualties, to exercise restraint and to bring this situation to an end.

We welcome Egyptian efforts to secure a ceasefire agreement. We encourage Egypt to persist with its efforts, and others to work closely together with them.

We also applaud the Secretary-General's commitment to help secure a ceasefire, including through his visit to the region and the United Nation's efforts to broker humanitarian pauses. And we welcome President Abbas's support for an immediate ceasefire.

Hundreds of thousands of vulnerable civilians in Gaza are suffering acutely from this crisis and bear no responsibility for the rocket fire.

At least 100,000 Gazans have been displaced by the conflict. Hundreds of thousands are suffering shortages of water, sanitation and electricity.

The United Kingdom will provide $3 million in new funding, to help UNRWA supply immediate emergency assistance for over 84,000 people who are seeking shelter in their schools. We are also bringing forward over $4 million in funding to the International Committee of the Red Cross to provide emergency healthcare and to repair crucial water wells and pipelines damaged by the airstrikes.

Mr President,

This situation is grimly familiar. It is the third major military operation in Gaza in six years. The priority must be to achieve a durable ceasefire that ends the cycle of violence.

A ceasefire agreement must address the underlying causes of the crisis. It needs to secure full implementation of both Security Council resolution 1860 and the November 2012 ceasefire agreement. There will need to be concerted action to get a grip on the security situation and open up Gaza's economy. The Palestinian Authority must return to Gaza.

None of this will be easy. But without it, we are bound to see a repeat of this crisis.

Mr President,

We cannot forget the appalling violence continues elsewhere in the Middle East.

The Syrian regime's relentless brutality has created an environment where violent extremism is taking hold. What's happening in Syria is not, and it has never been, about terrorism. It is about the legitimate demands of the Syrian people and their desire for the basic rights of freedom and dignity. But Assad's regime responds to demands with horrendous brutality.

Now, Syria is the number one destination for jihadists anywhere in the world. And the violence is spreading beyond Syria's borders. Let us be clear: Assad is not the answer to the terrorist threat – he is the cause of it.

The advance of such violent extremists in the region underscores the need to support moderate groups in Syria. These moderate groups are the only forces fighting extremists and Assad's tyranny.

Mr President,

This Council has taken a major step to help alleviate some of the horrors facing ordinary Syrians. With the adoption of Resolution 2165, many Syrians will soon receive the food and medical supplies they desperately need. It is vital that the United Nations rapidly deploys its monitoring mission so aid can begin to flow through these additional crossings. We welcome

assurances from the Syrian National Coalition and Free Syrian Army that they will implement resolution 2165 in order to help aid reach those in urgent need of assistance.

Mr President,

We know that a lasting solution to the Syria crisis comes from a political solution. We welcome newly appointed UN Special Representative Staffan di Mistura and urge all parties to work closely towards a Syrian-led political transition.

We commend the Syrian National Coalition on the recent election of its President, Hadi al-Bahra. Along with our partners, we will continue to provide practical, technical and political support to the National Coalition.

Syria will only know a stable peace when those responsible for atrocities are held to account. In that context we welcome the recent resolution of the Human Rights Council and we will continue to work to ensure that victims receive justice, including at the International Criminal Court.

Finally, Mr President,

We utterly condemn reported atrocities by ISIL, who have advanced through western and northern Iraq displacing an estimated 650,000 people. We note with grave concern the events in Mosul this past weekend. The threats by ISIL against the Christian community in particular, which has been in Mosul for nearly 2,000 years, is horrific. As the Secretary General has said, systematic attacks against civilians because of their faith or religious beliefs may constitute a crime against humanity.

ISIL poses a grave threat to the local population, to the security, stability and territorial integrity of the state, and to the wider region.

The single most important factor that will determine whether Iraq overcomes this challenge is political unity. It is therefore vital that a new inclusive government is formed as soon as possible.

I commend the work of the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Iraq, Nickolay Mladenov and urge Iraq's politicians to ensure that a President and Prime Minister are appointed as soon as possible.

Thank you, Mr President.

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