

PM statement on Syria: 16 April 2018

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Mr Speaker, before I come to the substance of my statement I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in offering our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Sergeant Matt Tonroe from the 3rd Battalion the Parachute Regiment who was killed by an improvised explosive device on 29 March.

Sergeant Tonroe was embedded with US forces on a counter-Daesh operation. He served his country with great distinction and it is clear he was a gifted and intelligent instructor who was respected by everyone he served with. Sergeant Tonroe fought to protect British values, our freedoms, and to keep this country safe.

With permission Mr Speaker, I would like to make a Statement on the actions that we have taken, together with our American and French allies, to degrade the Syrian Regime's chemical weapons capabilities - and to deter their future use.

On Saturday 7th April, up to 75 people, including young children, were killed in an horrific attack in Douma, with as many as 500 further casualties.

All indications are that this was a chemical weapons attack.

UK medical and scientific experts have analysed open-source reports, images and video footage from the incident and concluded that the victims were exposed to a toxic chemical.

This is corroborated by first-hand accounts from NGOs and aid workers.

While the World Health Organisation received reports that hundreds of patients arrived at Syrian health facilities on Saturday night with “signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals.”

And, based on our assessment, we do not think that these reports could be falsified on this scale.

Furthermore, Mr Speaker, the Syrian Regime has reportedly been attempting to conceal the evidence by searching evacuees from Douma to ensure samples are not being smuggled from this area.

And a wider operation to conceal the facts of the attack is under way, supported by the Russians.

Mr Speaker, the images of this suffering are utterly haunting.

Innocent families – seeking shelter in underground bunkers – found dead with foam in their mouths, burns to their eyes and their bodies surrounded by a chlorine-like odour.

Children gasping for life as chemicals choked their lungs.

The fact that such an atrocity can take place in our world today is a stain on our humanity.

And we are clear about who is responsible.

A significant body of information – including intelligence – indicates the Syrian Regime is responsible for this latest attack.

Open source accounts state that barrel bombs were used to deliver the chemicals.

Barrel bombs are usually delivered by helicopters. Multiple open source reports and intelligence indicates that Regime helicopters operated over Douma on the evening of 7th April, shortly before reports emerged in social media of a chemical attack. And the Syrian military officials coordinated what appears to be the use of chlorine weapons.

Mr Speaker, no other group could have carried out this attack.

The Opposition does not operate helicopters or use barrel bombs.

Daesh does not even have a presence in Douma.

And the reports of this attack are consistent with previous Regime attacks.

These include the attack on 21st August 2013 where over 800 people were killed and thousands more injured in a chemical attack also in Ghouta.

14 further smaller scale chemical attacks reported prior to that Summer.

3 further chlorine attacks in 2014 and 2015 which the independent UNSC-mandated investigation attributed to the Regime.

And the attack at Khan Shaykhun on 4th April last year, where the Syrian Regime used sarin against its people killing around 100 with a further 500 casualties.

Based on the Regime's persistent pattern of behaviour and the cumulative analysis of specific incidents we judged it highly likely that the Syrian regime had continued to use chemical weapons on at least four occasions since the attack in Khan Shaykhun. And we judged that they would have continued to do so.

So we needed to intervene rapidly to alleviate further indiscriminate humanitarian suffering.

Mr Speaker, we have explored every possible diplomatic channel to do so, but our efforts have been repeatedly thwarted.

Following the sarin attack in Eastern Damascus back in August 2013, the Syrian Regime committed to dismantle its chemical weapon programme - and Russia promised to ensure that Syria did this, overseen by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

At the weekend, the Leader of the Opposition cited this diplomatic agreement as a "precedent that this process can work."

But this process did not work.

It did not eradicate the chemical weapons capability of the Syrian Regime, with only last month the OPCW finding that Syria's declaration of its former Chemical Weapons programme is incomplete.

And, as I have already set out, it did not stop the Syrian Regime from carrying out the most abhorrent atrocities using these weapons.

Furthermore, on each occasion when we have seen every sign of chemical weapons being used, Russia has blocked any attempt to hold the perpetrators to account at the UN Security Council, with six such vetoes since the start of 2017.

And just last week, Russia blocked a UN Resolution that would have established an independent investigation able to determine responsibility for this latest attack.

So regrettably, we had no choice but to conclude that diplomatic action on its own is not going to work.

The Leader of the Opposition has said that he can “only countenance involvement in Syria if there is UN authority behind it”.

The House should be clear that would mean a Russian veto on our foreign policy.

When the Cabinet met on Thursday we considered the advice of the Attorney General.

Based on this advice we agreed that it was not just morally right but also legally right to take military action, together with our closest allies, to alleviate further humanitarian suffering.

This was not about intervening in a civil war. And it was not about regime change.

It was about a limited, targeted and effective strike that sought to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people by degrading the Syrian Regime’s chemical weapons capability and deterring their use.

And we have published the legal basis for this action.

It required three conditions to be met.

First, there must be convincing evidence, generally accepted by the international community as a whole, of extreme humanitarian distress on a large scale, requiring immediate and urgent relief.

Second, it must be objectively clear that there is no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives are to be saved.

And third, the proposed use of force must be necessary and proportionate to the aim of relief of humanitarian suffering and must be strictly limited in time and in scope to this aim.

These are the same three criteria used as the legal justification for the UK’s role in the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

Our intervention in 1991 with the US and France - and in 1992 with the US - to create safe havens and enforce the no fly zones in Iraq following the Gulf War were also justified on the basis of humanitarian intervention.

So governments of all colours have long considered that military action, on an exceptional basis, where necessary and proportionate, and as a last resort, to avert an overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe is permissible under international law.

Mr Speaker, I have set out why we are convinced by the evidence and why there was no practicable alternative.

Let me set out how this military response was also proportionate.

This was a limited, targeted and effective strike that would significantly degrade Syrian Chemical Weapons capabilities and deter their future use - and with clear boundaries that expressly sought to avoid escalation and did everything possible to prevent civilian casualties.

As a result the co-ordinated actions of the US, UK and France were successfully and specifically targeted at three sites.

Contrary to what the Leader of the Opposition said at the weekend, these were not “empty buildings.”

The first was the Barzeh branch of the Scientific Studies and Research Centre in Northern Damascus.

This was a centre for the research and development of Syria’s chemical and biological programme. It was hit by 57 American T-LAMs and 19 American JASSMs.

The second site was the Him Shinsar chemical weapons bunkers, 15 miles west of the city of Homs, which contained both a chemical weapons equipment and storage facility and an important command post.

These were successfully hit by 7 French SCALP cruise missiles.

And the third site was the Him Shinsar chemical weapons storage site and former missile base which is now a military facility.

This was assessed to be a location of Syrian Sarin and precursor production equipment whose destruction would degrade Syria’s ability to deliver Sarin in the future.

This was hit by 9 US TLAMs, 5 naval and 2 SCALP cruise missiles from France – and 8 storm shadow missiles launched by our four RAF Tornado GR4s.

Very careful scientific analysis was used to determine where best to target these missiles to maximise the destruction of stockpiled chemicals and to minimise any risks to the surrounding area.

And the facility that we targeted is located some distance from any known population centres, reducing yet further any such risk of civilian casualties.

Mr Speaker, while targeted and limited, these strikes by the US, UK and France were significantly larger than the US action a year ago after the attack at Khan Shaykhun - and specifically designed to have a greater impact on the regime’s capability and willingness to use chemical weapons.

We also minimised the chances of wider escalation through our carefully targeted approach and the House will note that Russia has not reported any losses of personnel or equipment as a result of the strikes.

And I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to all the British service men and women – and their American and French allies – who successfully carried out this mission with such courage and professionalism.

Mr Speaker, let me deal specifically with three important questions.

First, why did we not wait for the investigation from the OPCW?

UNSC-Mandated inspectors have investigated previous attacks and on four occasions decided that the Regime was indeed responsible.

We are confident in our own assessment that the Syrian Regime was highly likely responsible for this attack and that its persistent pattern of behaviour meant that it was highly likely to continue using chemical weapons.

Furthermore, there were clearly attempts to block any proper investigation, as we saw with the Russian veto at the UN earlier in the week.

And let me set this out in detail. We support strongly the work of the OPCW fact-finding mission that is currently in Damascus.

But that mission is only able to make an assessment of whether chemical weapons were used.

Even if the OPCW team is able to visit Douma to gather information to make that assessment – and they are currently being prevented from doing so by the Regime and the Russians – it cannot attribute responsibility.

This is because Russia vetoed in November 2017 an extension of the Joint Investigatory Mechanism set up to do this. And last week, in the wake of the Douma attack, it again vetoed a new UNSC resolution to re-establish such a mechanism.

And even if we had OPCW's findings, and a mechanism to attribute, for as long as Russia continues to veto, the UN Security Council still would not be able to act.

So Mr Speaker, we cannot wait to alleviate further humanitarian suffering caused by chemical weapons attacks.

Second, were we not just following orders from America?

Let me be absolutely clear: we have acted because it is in our national interest to do so.

It is in our national interest to prevent the further use of chemical weapons in Syria - and to uphold and defend the global consensus that these weapons should not be used.

For we cannot allow the use of chemical weapons to become normalised - either within Syria, on the streets of the UK or elsewhere.

So we have not done this because President Trump asked us to do so.

We have done it because we believed it was the right thing to do. And we are not alone.

There is broad based international support for the action we have taken.

NATO has issued a statement setting out its support, as have the Gulf Co-operation Council and a number of countries in the region.

And over the weekend I have spoken to a range of world leaders - including Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Gentiloni, Prime Minister Trudeau, Prime Minister Turnbull and European Council President Donald Tusk.

All have expressed their support for the actions that Britain, France and America have taken.

Third, why did we not recall Parliament?

Mr Speaker, the speed with which we acted was essential in co-operating with our partners to alleviate further humanitarian suffering and to maintain the vital security of our operations.

This was a limited, targeted strike on a legal basis that has been used before.

And it was a decision which required the evaluation of intelligence and information much of which was of a nature that could not be shared with Parliament.

We have always been clear that the government has the right to act quickly in the national interest.

I am absolutely clear, Mr Speaker, that it is Parliament's responsibility to hold me to account for such decisions – and Parliament will do so.

But it is my responsibility as Prime Minister to make these decisions.

And I will make them.

Mr Speaker, as I have been clear this military action was not about intervening in the civil war in Syria – or about regime change.

But we are determined to do our utmost to help resolve the conflict in Syria.

That means concluding the fight against Daesh, which still holds pockets of territory in Syria.

It means working to enable humanitarian access and continuing our efforts at the forefront of global response, where the UK has already committed almost £2.5 billion, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

And next week, we will attend the second Brussels Conference on supporting the Future of Syria and the Region which will focus on humanitarian support, bolstering the UN-led political process in Geneva, and ensuring continued international support to refugees and

host countries - driving forward the legacy of our own London Conference held in 2016.

And it means supporting international efforts to reinvigorate the process to deliver a political solution: for this is the best long-term hope for the Syrian people.

The UK will do all of these things.

But as I have also been clear, that is not what these military strikes were about.

Mr Speaker, as I have set out, the military action that we have taken this weekend was specifically focused on degrading the Syrian Regime's chemical weapons capability and deterring their future use.

In order to achieve this there must also be a wider diplomatic effort – including the full range of political and economic levers – to strengthen the global norms prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, which have stood for nearly a century.

So we will continue to work with our international partners on tough economic action against those involved with the production or dissemination of chemical weapons.

And I welcome the conclusions of today's European Foreign Affairs Council, attended by my Rt Hon Friend the Foreign Secretary, that confirmed the Council is willing to consider further restrictive measures on those involved in the development and use of chemical weapons in Syria.

We will continue to push for the re-establishment of an international investigative mechanism which can attribute responsibility for chemical weapon use in Syria.

We will advance with our French allies the new International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons, which will meet in the coming weeks.

And we will continue to strengthen the international coalition we have built since the attack on Salisbury.

Mr Speaker, last Thursday's report from the OPCW has confirmed our findings that it was indeed a Novichok in Salisbury – and I have placed a copy of that report's Executive Summary in the Library of the House.

While of a much lower order of magnitude, the use of a nerve agent on the streets of Salisbury is part of a pattern of disregard for the global norms that prohibit the use of chemical weapons.

So while the action was taken to alleviate humanitarian suffering in Syria by degrading the Regime's chemical weapons capability and deterring its use of these weapons - it will also send a clear message to anyone who believes they can use chemical weapons with impunity.

We cannot go back to a world where the use of chemical weapons becomes normalised.

Mr Speaker, I am deeply conscious of the gravity of these decisions.

They affect all members of this House - and me personally.

And I understand the questions that – rightly – will be asked about British military action particularly in such a complex region.

But I am clear that the way we protect our national interest is to stand up for the global rules and standards that keep us safe.

That is what we have done – and what we will continue to do.

And I commend this statement to the House.

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