Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

54th Special Session of the Executive Council

2017-04-13

Thank you, Madam Chair,

The United Kingdom supports the statement made by the Ambassador of Malta on behalf of the European Union. I would like to make a few additional remarks.

It is a matter of huge regret that the Executive Council has to meet in extraordinary session today. This is the latest in a series of meetings the Council has held over the past four years to address the regular use of chemical weapons in Syria. At each meeting the United Kingdom, and many others, has expressed deep concern about continued chemical weapons use in Syria, and about the Syrian Government's failure to account fully for its chemical weapons programme.

What happened in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April was the worst of human acts. As we have heard, at least 72 civilians, including many children, were killed by an attack so awful that many died where they fell. Those facts are not in dispute. This was a war crime. The need to find out who was responsible, and to seek justice for the victims, is the reason we meet here today.

United Kingdom scientists have now analysed samples obtained from Khan Shaykhun. These samples have tested positive for the nerve agent sarin, or a sarin-like substance. The United Kingdom's assessment is that it is highly likely that the Syrian Government was responsible for a sarin attack on Khan Shaykhun on 4 April.

Let me explain why.

There is no evidence to suggest that any party to the conflict in Syria, other than the Syrian Government, has access to a nerve agent such as sarin. Only the Syrian Air Force has the capability to launch a chemical weapons attack from aircraft, and it has already been condemned by this Council for having used chemical weapons deployed from aircraft on at least three occasions in 2014 and 2015.

Other countries have also made assessments. The United Kingdom fully supports the United States action on 6 April, which we believe was an appropriate response to the chemical weapons attack launched by the Syrian Government, and was intended to deter further attacks.

Meanwhile the Syrian Government, and their Russian allies, have told us a simply extraordinary story of an airstrike on a jihadist chemical weapons storage facility on April 4th. We all watched the terrible news footage reporting the early morning attacks in real time, but the Syrians have told us tales of conventional air attacks at midday. Are the Syrians telling us that the people we saw dying last Tuesday morning did so before the attack took place? This is a story which is simply not credible.

Since Syria joined the Convention, in the aftermath of the Ghouta atrocity, the Syrian Government has denied scientific reality and obstructed the truth about the full extent of its chemical weapons programme.

Syria and its backers claim that it has destroyed its chemical weapon stockpiles. Yet the Director General has continued to report that the OPCW cannot declare Syria's declaration of its chemical weapons programme as "accurate and complete", and that serious "gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies remain". While the Director General and the Technical Secretariat have worked tirelessly to establish the truth, Syria has failed to reciprocate. The Syrian government has provided limited information, only under pressure and when challenged with evidence that made its position untenable. Syrian engagement with the OPCW has been neither meaningful nor honest. Their supposed cooperation is a facade. The fact that the JIM has found regular Regime use of chemical weapons underscores the fact that Syria has unquestionably failed to account for, and to destroy, its whole chemical weapons programme.

Madam Chair,

It is bad enough that the Syrian government continues to deceive the international community. However, it is shocking that one country, a founding member of the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the joint architect of the 2013 agreement to remove and destroy Syria's chemical weapons programme, is joining them in this deception. We saw last night Russia's 8th veto in the Security Council to protect the Syrian government. The draft resolution vetoed by Russia condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and called for a full investigation. How any responsible country could object to that, is truly impossible for us to comprehend.

So what is the way forward? It is clear.

We welcome the Director General's statement this morning about the work of the Fact Finding Mission to date. He rightly tasked the FFM to begin its work on the Khan Shaykhun incident within hours of the reports coming in on 4 April. As we all know, the FFM is professional, independent and impartial, and has unparalleled technical expertise. Calls from Syria's allies, and parties to the conflict, to set up alternative investigations and new bodies are absurd. This is a blatant attempt to delay and distract from the essential task at hand. It

also seeks to undermine the integrity and impartiality of the OPCW, and is frankly disrespectful to the ideals we share. The priority now is to support the Director General, and the FFM, in their investigation. When the FFM reports in the weeks ahead, the Executive Council should convene again, as we have agreed this morning, and take the necessary action on its findings. That’s our responsibility under the Chemical Weapons Convention. And that’s our duty to the suffering people of Syria.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/54th-special-session-of-the-executive-council