North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Press conference

by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen following the first North Atlantic Council Working Session and meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in Foreign Affairs Ministers session
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Good afternoon.

We have just finished a constructive meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. We had a broad agenda, and discussed pressing international security issues.

We share a common vision for Afghanistan, as a country that is secure, stable and at peace with itself and the wider region. Our assessments of the progress made towards that strategic goal may sometimes differ. But our objectives with regard to Afghanistan and the broader region coincide.

Today, we launched the second phase of the NATO-Russia Trust Fund for the maintenance of helicopters in Afghanistan. This will expand our support for the Afghan Air Force by providing training to technicians on more types of helicopter, and in new areas, such as developing the Afghan Air Force's medical evacuation capability. This project is of great value to Afghanistan, and it shows the NATO-Russia Council efforts can contribute to security and stability in Afghanistan.

This year we will also take further steps in our counter- terrorism projects. In June, we will be testing for the first time a technology we developed jointly to detect explosives in crowed places. The test will be held in a metro station in a European capital. And in September, the NATO-Russia joint air traffic system will conduct a live exercise to defend against terrorist threats to civilian aircraft.

These are concrete examples of our expanding cooperation.

One area where we have maintained an active dialogue but made limited progress remains missile defence. It is important that we keep working on this. We have the opportunity to re-energise our dialogue, and we should use it.

This morning, in a separate session at 28, NATO foreign ministers agreed a statement on North Korea which I expect you have already seen.

We condemn in the strongest possible terms North Korea's continued development of ballistic missile and nuclear weapons, and its recent inflammatory and threatening rhetoric. These provocative actions are in direct violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions and

seriously undermine regional stability, jeopardise the prospects for lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, and threaten international peace and security.

We urge North Korea to refrain from further provocative acts; abide by its international obligations; abandon all nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes; and engage in credible and authentic talks on denuclearisation.

We also focused on developments in the Middle East and North Africa.

Je condamne avec fermeté l'attentat commis contre l'ambassade de la France à Tripoli.

J'exprime toute ma sympathie avec ceux qui ont été affectés et ma pleine solidarité avec la France.

The Patriot deployment in Turkey is proof of the commitment and capability of NATO Allies to deter threats and defend Turkey. Collective defence is at the core of NATO's mandate. And our solidarity with our Ally Turkey remains rock solid.

Since we last met in December, the situation in Syria has dramatically deteriorated. This worsening crisis continues to pose a threat to regional stability.

We are extremely concerned about the humanitarian situation and the daily suffering of the Syrian people.

We are extremely concerned about the risk of a regional spill-over. Our Ally Turkey has faced cross-border incidents and massive refugee flows.

And we are extremely concerned about the use of ballistic missiles in Syria and the possible use of chemical weapons.

There is no call for NATO to play a role. But if these challenges remain unaddressed, they could directly affect our own security. So we will continue to remain extremely vigilant.

And with this, I am ready to take your questions.

OANA LUNGESCU (NATO Spokesperson): The Independent.

Q: Kim Sengupta from The Independent. Can I ask you, Secretary General, to expand a bit more on the latest, if you can, on the latest report of use of chemical weapons by the regime, which is by the Israelis this time. At what point do you think the red line we keep on hearing about will be crossed?

Can I also ask, Mr. Rasmussen, what do you feel about Britain and France pressing the EU for relaxation of sanctions to give more arms to the rebels?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: Two very brief answers. First, as a matter of principle we don't comment on intelligence reports. Secondly, NATO does not interfere with European

Union decisions. And as you know, the question of the arms embargo regime is an EU issue.

OANA LUNGESCU: Reuters over there.

Q: Yes, Secretary General, on the... what contingency plans does the Alliance have to respond to a possible use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government? And the second I'd like to ask you about, there's an interview in the Financial Times today with the Syrian rebel commander, General Idriss, who calls for western backing to create a military unit to take back oil fields that are under control as Al Qaeda-linked groups. Do you have any view on that as to whether the oil fields are in the control of militants?

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN: First, again, as a matter of principle, we never comment on contingency plans, but I can assure you that we stand ready to defend and protect our Allies. In this case, Turkey as a neighbour of Syria. We have all plans in place to ensure effective defensive protection of Turkey.

In general, let me stress that I do believe that the right way forward is to find and pursue a political solution in Syria. In today's discussion I heard a lot of support for the so-called Geneva Framework. As you will recall, a number of international actors agreed some months ago, in Geneva, on a way forward that would lead to a political transition in Syria. There is a very strong call for bringing an end to the bloodshed immediately. We need a political solution and I heard a lot of support for the Geneva Framework. I hope that could be translated into something solid that can bring this suffering to an end.

Ministers today expressed very grave concern about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria.

OANA LUNGESCU: I'm afraid that's all we have time for.

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