Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

“We cannot choose to do nothing in the face of such barbarity.”

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Thank you Mr President for convening this urgent session and I welcome the briefing by Under Secretary-Generals Feltman and O’Brien. And I welcome the fact that this is a public session of the Security Council.

Aleppo has been Syria’s cultural capital for centuries, but in this conflict it has become a very different symbol. One of oppression, brutality, a symbol of Asad’s willingness to fight to the last breath, even if it means the very destruction of Syria itself.

You need only glance at media reports from yesterday.

At 11 am local time, two barrel bombs fell on the Al-Hulluk neighbourhood of Aleppo City. Four people were killed. Just after midday, regime shelling hit at least 7 neighbourhoods. A couple of hours later, at 230, rockets hit the al-Sha’ar neighbourhood.

I could go on, but I think the point is clear. The cessation of hostilities has effectively ceased to exist in Aleppo. The city is burning. People are dying.

In little over a week last month, two hundred and fifty three people were killed in Aleppo. Eighty of them were women and children. As Dr Abo El Ezz put it so painfully, “we are running out of coffins to bury our friends, family and colleagues”.

The cessation of hostilities was supposed to be one of the three pillars of Special Envoy De Mistura’s political settlement in Syria. But like the hospitals and houses of Aleppo, that pillar has been systematically attacked and degraded by the actions of the Asad regime. Any trace of optimism from resolution 2268 has all but evaporated.

Through his actions Asad has shown that he has no commitment to a political settlement; no commitment to bringing peace to Syria. It has never been clearer. There cannot be peace while he remains in power.

How can he play a role in the future when he orders his forces to impede access to humanitarian aid, in complete disregard of so many of our resolutions? When he wilfully denies those most in need of the very supplies that could save their lives? When he deliberately attacks hospitals, as we heard so painfully yesterday?

Asad and his allies will point to the threat of the terrorist group Jabhat al-Nusra in Aleppo. They will claim that those actions are in defence of the Syrian people. But how in any circumstances can the assault and encirclement of an entire city be justified? How can the shelling of hospitals and schools be justified? These attacks amount to nothing more than barbaric, collective punishment. They are war crimes and I agree with the Secretary-General. Those responsible should be held fully accountable including at the International Criminal Court.

This Council has an obligation to the people of Aleppo. We have an obligation to show that we are working for their protection; that we are trying to find that elusive political settlement that will end this war.

What confidence can a man, woman or child in Aleppo have in our words today? What faith can they place in any future cessation of hostilities, when they've seen this one abused so violently?

The only way to build that confidence, to restore that faith, is to stop the violence. We owe it to the people of Aleppo to be clear and candid about the efforts to stop those attacks.

Without such clarity, how can they believe that a cessation of hostilities won't be used as cover for further military advances? So I welcome the recent announcement about the US/Russia agreement reaffirming the cessation of hostilities in Aleppo, Latakia and Eastern Ghouta, but we must now see an immediate positive response to that latest development. Only its full implementation will give the people of Syria that much needed clarity. Actions speak louder than words.

To support that effort, the United Kingdom is today proposing a Security Council statement that condemns the violence in Aleppo and calls for an urgent end to the brutality. We owe it to the people of Aleppo, the living and the dead, to show that this Council can speak with one voice on this issue, and that we can work together to bring this violence to an end.

We cannot choose to do nothing in the face of such barbarity. To do so would be tantamount to collusion with the very forces destroying Aleppo.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-cannot-choose-to-do-nothing-in-the-face-of-such-barbarity