Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary oral statement to Parliament on Syria

2014-01-13

Speaking today, Foreign Secretary William Hague, said:

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on Syria. I would first like to inform the House that we have reached E3 plus 3 agreement with Iran on implementing, from 20 January, the first stage nuclear agreement reached in Geneva, as set out in my statement on 25 November. We will now move to seek a comprehensive settlement on the nuclear issue with Iran.

Yesterday I attended the meeting of the core group of the Friends of Syria in Paris to prepare the ground for the Geneva II peace negotiations beginning in Montreux on 22 January.

In his letter of invitation, the UN Secretary-General makes it clear that the aim is, ‘to assist the Syrian parties in ending the violence and achieving a comprehensive agreement for a political settlement, implementing fully the Geneva Communiqué, while preserving the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria.’ That means agreeing a transitional governing body in Syria with full executive powers, formed by mutual consent, to meet the aspirations of the Syrian people.

Our united message in Paris yesterday, from all 11 countries represented, was the vital necessity of this process, the great importance of both the regime and the opposition being prepared to attend, and our determination to support a political settlement and end the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people.

No one should underestimate the difficulty of the negotiations ahead, but we will not give up on diplomacy as the route to stopping the appalling bloodshed, nor will we waver in supporting the moderate Syrian opposition, for if there is only a murderous regime on the one side and extremists on the other, there can be no peaceful settlement in Syria.

President Al Jarba of the Syrian National Coalition has always said that he is ready to attend the Geneva negotiations. His task is to persuade the rest of the moderate opposition to agree to that at a time when their towns, villages and homes are under relentless attack. The National Coalition is expected to make a final decision at its general assembly this Friday. We urge it to attend and to put the spotlight on the Assad regime’s responsibility to end this terrible conflict.

Today Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov met UN and Arab League envoy Brahimi for further discussions ahead of the talks. There is a pressing need for measures that can build confidence ahead of the negotiations such as prisoner releases and progress on humanitarian access, including through local ceasefires. We call on all parties in Syria to work towards such actions.

Since my last statement to the House, the violence has remained intense. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights now puts the death toll at over 125,000 people.

The regime continues to bombard Aleppo and other towns and cities, including through the repeated use of barrel bombs. These huge canisters, filled with explosives and shards of metal and dropped from helicopters on to civilian areas, have killed 600 people in Aleppo alone since mid-December, including 172 children, and injured 3,000 people. The use of this deliberately indiscriminate weapon is yet another war crime and is clearly designed to sow terror and weaken the will of the civilian population. Assad and those around him should be in no doubt that the world will hold them to account.

The deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people is also utterly unacceptable. The UN Security Council presidential statement in October last year demanded that aid must be able to reach all Syrians.

However, the UN estimates that 2.5 million people inside Syria are currently not receiving assistance, including a quarter of a million people trapped in besieged or hard-to-access areas. Countless numbers of people are being denied access to food and medicines, and there are now sickening reports of innocent people dying from malnutrition.

Last week at the Security Council we proposed a new statement calling for immediate and unfettered access for aid. This was blocked by Russia, but we will continue to seek action at the UN Security Council and to work with Russia to try to bring about progress at Geneva and in the humanitarian situation.

More than half the Syrian population is now in need of humanitarian assistance: 9.3 million people within Syria, and 2.3 million refugees in the region, who are facing bitter winter conditions. The UK has now provided half a billion pounds in aid—the largest sum our country has ever committed to a single crisis.

Today my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced that we have now allocated or delivered on all our funding promises. On Wednesday she will attend a pledging conference in Kuwait where the UK will make a major further donation, in response to the new UN appeal, of $6.5 billion for Syria in 2014, and we will urge other countries to be equally generous.

We will also press for the lifting of sieges and access for humanitarian organisations, the immediate end to attacks on civilian areas and medical facilities, and respect for international humanitarian law.

In this House and this country we are very conscious of the importance of a greater role for women in ending conflicts and building peace. The UK has led the way in advocating a direct role for women in the Geneva negotiations.

We have put forward proposals to ensure that both sides include women in their delegations, we have urged the UN to facilitate a clear role for women's groups and civil society in the form of a consultative body present at the negotiations, and we are providing £200,000 in funding to enable Syrian women's groups to take part.

On top of our humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people, we have given more than £20 million in support for opposition groups, civil society, human rights defenders and media activists. This includes training and equipping search and rescue teams, providing power generators and communications equipment, supporting and training civil administrations, and helping survivors of sexual violence.

In November last year, we announced an increase in non-lethal support to the supreme military council of General Idris, including communications assistance and medical and logistics equipment. In December, we took the decision to impose a temporary halt to deliveries of those supplies, following fighting over control of the border crossing at Bab al-Hawa. We are ready to resume—and to consider increasing—this assistance as soon as we are satisfied that conditions on the ground allow the military council to take safe delivery of our equipment.

Since 3 January, Syrian opposition groups have been battling an al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist group—the so-called 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' - in dozens of locations across northern Syria.

Opposition groups are reported to have driven the al-Qaeda-affiliated group back in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama and al-Raqqah governorates. The fighting has been accompanied by widespread public demonstrations against the torture and summary executions carried out by the extremists.

That the moderate opposition is prepared to fight against these groups is a demonstration to the world that they reject extremism, just as they reject the Assad regime.

It gives the lie to Assad's claim that that there is no choice other than his regime or extremist terrorists. And it underlines the importance of supporting the moderate opposition forces to help them counter the extremists—which is vital for security in the region and in the UK.

Assad’s brutality is the best recruiting tool the extremists have. Ultimately, the only long-term way to deal with the extremist threat is to reach an inclusive political settlement.

We have always warned that the longer the conflict continues, the greater the consequences will be for regional peace and security.

There have been further car bombings in Lebanon, as well as clashes on the Lebanese border. There has also been fierce fighting in western Iraq involving al-Qaeda extremists—at least in part the result of the conflict in Syria. And both Jordan and Lebanon, as well as Turkey, are generously coping with the strain of the ever-increasing burden of Syrian refugees, hosting more than 575,000 and more than 860,000 refugees respectively. We have given more than £111 million in humanitarian support to Jordan, more than £109 million to Lebanon, and more than £15 million to the Lebanese and Jordanian armed forces to help protect their borders.

One area in which progress is being made is the destruction of Syria’s chemical stocks. The first consignment of the most dangerous chemicals has now left Syria, after a short delay caused by intense fighting and poor weather. The Syrian regime must ensure that the remaining material is transported to the port as quickly as possible, to ensure that all chemicals can be eliminated by the end of June.

The disposal of Syria’s chemical stockpile is a strong example of international co-operation. Italy, the United States, Russia, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Finland and China are all making important contributions.

In addition to the support worth £2.4 million that the UK has provided to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons destruction effort, we announced on 19 December that we would accept some of the chemicals for destruction in commercial facilities here. These chemicals are similar to many other industrial chemicals routinely handled in the UK and we are working to ensure the safe management of this operation.

A Royal Navy ship, HMS Montrose, is about to join the escort of the Danish and Norwegian vessels transporting the chemical stocks from Syria. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has also informed the House today that we will provide specialist equipment for use on board the US vessel where material of greatest proliferation concern will be neutralised.

The situation on the ground in Syria is appalling and getting worse, as I have described. The threat to regional and international security continues to grow, as the conflict increasingly cannot be contained within Syrian borders. We will continue to intensify our efforts to reach a political settlement, to save lives and to protect our own security.

It is only through a political resolution that the conflict can be brought to an end. The start of the Geneva II peace conference on 22 January is an important step, and, while we have no illusions about how difficult and challenging a process this is likely to be, we will do everything possible, with other nations, to help it succeed.

Further information

Latest update on UK aid to Syria

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