Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Olympic Truce: a source of optimism and inspiration in a troubled world

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It is a great pleasure and a proud moment for us in the country to welcome all our friends from around the world to London including our friends from the International Olympic Committee who are here with us today on the eve of the Olympic and Paralympic Games; and a particular honour to speak alongside UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. We've had some extremely good discussions this afternoon.

The Games are a time of celebration and hope, and the Olympic Truce itself is a source of optimism and inspiration in a troubled world.

We are proud that we set the first world record of these Olympic Games in October last year, when we managed to get all 193 Member States of the United Nations to co-sponsor our Olympic Truce Resolution - and that is the first time this has ever been possible.

Since then, it has been our ambition to inspire and unite people in countries around the world with the ideals of the Truce and all this stands for. I will say a few words in a moment about how our Embassies and diplomats around the world have used the Truce to promote peace and conflict resolution around the world.

But first, we should remember all those who are enduring the horrors of war: who are displaced, who are refugees, the child soldiers forced to fight against their will, those with their livelihoods and dreams destroyed, the families torn apart and the victims of rape. We should all remember all those valiant people in governments and civil society striving to rebuild societies emerging from conflict, or to stand up for human rights and freedom.

War, I think we can agree is a scar on the conscience of humanity. It is because of the terrible cost of conflict that we believe that nations gathered in New York today have a duty to come together and agree a robust, legally-binding and ambitious Arms Trade Treaty. Our common interest in reducing conflict should be far greater than any differences that divide us. After six years of preparations and four weeks of intensive negotiations, we call for each nation around the table to make every effort possible to reach a historic agreement today which would, for the first time, regulate the global arms trade. It is time for governments of the world to fulfil their responsibilities and agree a strong Arms Trade Treaty.

I also want to send a clear warning to the Syria regime as it masses its forces against the beleaguered city of Aleppo.

This utterly unacceptable escalation of the conflict could lead to a devastating loss of civilian life and a humanitarian disaster. It will add to the misery being endured by the Syrian people, and plunge the country further into catastrophic civil war.

The Assad regime must call off this assault. I call on all countries around the world, including all the Permanent Members of the Security Council, to join us in condemning these actions and to insist on a political process to end the violence in Syria. All those countries with influence on the Syrian regime should bring it to bear now. No nation should stand silent while people in Aleppo are threatened with a potential massacre.

Throughout these Games the British Government will not relent for an instant in efforts to bring about an end to the conflict and increase the pressure on the Assad regime. This dire situation illustrates very strongly why the people of Syria needed the Security Council Resolution we proposed last week. The regime should be in no doubt that the world is watching its actions, including any intention to use chemical or biological weapons and that those responsible for the crimes being committed will one day be held to account.

In a world that can sometimes seem bleak in the face of such atrocities, sport has the power to bring people together and remind them of their common humanity.

All of us who have travelled overseas to conflict zones around the world will have marvelled at and admired the spirit, energy and tenacity with which people turn to sport.

At Christmas in 1914, British and German troops abandoned their trenches and entered No-Man's Land. They exchanged small gifts, and someone brought a football with them. Despite the enmity between their nations for that day they were men playing a game of football far from home.

The Olympic Truce itself dates back to the 8th Century BC, when it was used to enable spectators and participants to travel safely to and from the Games.

Today, the Truce, embodied in a United Nations resolution, calls on UN Member States of to promote those ideals at all levels in their societies, as well as internationally.

Our Prime Minister described this Olympic Truce as a 'historic opportunity, and we wanted to ensure that we made the most of it.

On top of our Government's financial and political commitment to conflict prevention and poverty reduction, we decided to mobilise the ideals of the Olympic Truce; development, participation education, to bring a diverse range of people together.

Here in the United Kingdom, LOCOG have managed to bring the ideals of the Olympic Truce to more than 20,000 schools though their ambitious ‘Get Set’ programme.

Internationally we sought ways to use our diplomatic network - one of the largest in the world - to bring people together from all parts of society including governments, international organisations, opposing parties, ex combatants, women, people with disabilities, politicians, the young and the old.

In Thailand we organised a media development course for key reporters and commentators on the violence in Southern Thailand, encouraging more objective journalism, which can be consumed widely without fear of fuelling further discontent.

In Sarajevo we worked with the Nansen Dialogue centre to bring together students from different communities to create short documentaries. The film they created about the Olympic Truce was played during the Sarajevo Film Festival in July.

In Sri Lanka, our High Commission hosted a sports day, inspired by the Paralympics, for disabled soldiers, disabled ex-LTTE combatants and disabled civilians; bringing together former adversaries.

And in the Philippines, alongside local representatives, we organised a coaching and football tournament to bring together Christian and Muslim communities.

These are just a few examples of our work, and I am grateful to all of our diplomats and staff around the world who have played a part in these projects, and to all our friends and partners who have worked with us including British parliamentarians including Lord Bates who brilliantly over a few months walked from Olympia in Greece to London to raise awareness of the Olympic Truce.

In June I also announced a major new UK initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. This will be a focus of our G8 Presidency next year. We must shatter the culture of impunity for those who use rape as a weapon of war.

Of course it would be naive to expect all people, everywhere in the World to forget their grievances and lay enmity aside for a couple of months every two or four years.

But if there is one thing that we can take from the Olympic motto, ‘Citius, Altius, Fortius’ - Higher, Faster, Stronger - is that in foreign policy we must always strive to build on the achievements of the past, whether it is to extend human rights and freedom, protect our global environment, or support peace in conflict-ravaged countries.

I hope that Russia, Brazil and South Korea, as the future stewards of the Olympic Truce, also go on to use the spirit of the Olympics to bring communities together, and perhaps, during one Olympics in the future, we can be a world genuinely at peace.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/olympic-truce-a-source-of-optimism-and-inspiration-in-a-troubled-world