Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"These are the cold, calculating actions of a regime that chooses to starve its fellow Syrians into surrender."

2017-05-30

Thank you Mr President, and thank you Stephen for your powerful briefing and for all that you do on this crucial issue.

We're meeting today exactly five months since a ceasefire was declared in Syria. Sadly, as Stephen has set out, it's a ceasefire that exists in name only. The past five months have seen continued fighting, continued atrocities, continued destruction. Throughout, civilians have been maimed and killed, starved and besieged. And in towns like Khan Sheikhoun, they've been exposed to the very worst of humanity.

Like many others here in this Chamber, we cautiously welcomed the ceasefire and the Astana agreement on de-escalation zones. After six years of fighting, we're all ready to support a genuine effort to bring an overdue end to the bloodshed. But the fact is, Mr President, the Astana plans have done little to help the people of Syria. Instead, so far, they have done a great deal to help the regime and its allies. The guns have fallen silent only where it has suited them. The guns have been deafening elsewhere.

So in some places, yes, there has been an overdue reduction in the violence. But only where it suits the regime. We need only ask the people of Daraa province, one of the four so-called de-escalation zones, what the ceasefire feels like on the ground. Last week barrel bomb after barrel bomb, airstrike after airstrike rained down on opposition-held areas there. Is that what the regime means by ceasefire? Is that what they mean by de-escalation?

And just as the attacks have continued, so have the sieges. At the end of April, the UN estimated over 620,000 people were living under siege in Syria, the overwhelming majority in towns and villages besieged by the regime and its allies. How can anyone claim there is a ceasefire in place when the equivalent population of Las Vegas is being besieged? Quite simply, you can't.

Going hand in hand with continued attacks and continued besiegement is the continued failure to improve humanitarian access. As Stephen said, in the last two months, just only one aid delivery to an area besieged by the regime. That delivery was too little, too late, providing supplies for the bare minimum of the population.

And yet it doesn't have to be this way. The United Nations is standing by, ready to deliver aid and medicine to those in critical need. They know the route they'll take. They have the assurances they need from the opposition. And they have the mandate to act; all of us around this table have agreed, in countless resolutions, that access must be granted.

But instead, the UN teams are forced to wait. Not for aid, not for supplies, but, instead, for the regime's letters of approval; letters that never arrive. So the children continue to go hungry and the sick and wounded continue to die in pain. This isn't about bureaucracy or about paperwork; these are the cold, calculating actions of a regime that chooses to starve its fellow Syrians into surrender. You can see why the UN judges that this kind of behaviour constitutes war crimes.

In light of these continuing atrocities, it's clear that the guarantors of the Astana process need to do more, so much more, to make the ceasefire and de-escalation zones a reality.

This must mean a genuine end to the violence – a ceasefire in deed and not just in thought. It must mean effective and impartial monitoring mechanisms, ideally reporting to this UN Security Council, so that those who violate the ceasefire are named and held to account.

And it means sustained humanitarian access for the UN and its partners, with the UN being allowed to assess what each de-escalation zone needs. Those with influence over the regime, must ensure that this access is given; it is long overdue.

Above all, Mr President, if there is to be long-term peace in Syria, there has to full implementation of Resolution 2254, as our Egyptian colleague has just said, and there has to be justice. There has to be justice for the people of Khan Sheikhoun, for the people of Aleppo, for the people of so many places across Syria who have endured for so many years.

Without these steps, there simply isn't a credible plan; there is just the fiction that we have today. It is a fiction where ceasefires exist and yet bombs still fall. It is a fiction that has endured for too long.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/these-are-the-cold-calculating-actions-of-a-regime-that-chooses-to-starve-its-fellow-syrians-into-surrender