Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary statement to Parliament on Syria

2013-05-20

Speaking today the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, said:

Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a Statement on the conflict in Syria, which continues to worsen.

The Syrian regime's military offensive against opposition-held areas around Damascus, Homs, Idlib, Hama and Aleppo is intensifying, with complete disregard for civilian life. The death toll has doubled in the first five months of this year, and now stands at an estimated 80,000 people. There have been well-verified reports of massacres around Damascus by regime security forces, and communities killed in cold blood in villages around Baniyas. Online footage has shown bodies heaped in the streets, and children butchered in their homes. 10,000 people are believed to have fled the area in panic created by these brutal killings. And last week there were unconfirmed reports of further attacks using chemical weapons.

Over four million Syrians are internally displaced and a total of 6.8 million are in desperate need, including three million children. It is horrifying to imagine what life must be like for these children, witnessing violence and death on a daily basis, and enduring trauma, malnutrition, disease and shattered education.

This suffering has devastating consequences. It is undoubtedly contributing to radicalisation in Syria. Syrian people are facing a regime that is using warplanes, helicopters, heavy artillery, tanks, cluster munitions and even ballistic missiles against them, often without them having the means to defend themselves and their communities. The conflict is therefore creating opportunities for extremist groups. Syria is now the number one destination for jihadists anywhere in the world today, including approximately 70 to 100 individuals connected with the United Kingdom.

It is also endangering regional peace and security, with over 50 people killed in a bombing in Turkey last week, the kidnapping of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in the Golan Heights, cross-border shelling and clashes on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Half a million Syrians have become refugees in the last ten weeks alone, bringing the total number of refugees to 1.5 million, 75 per cent of whom are women and children. The UN assesses that by the end of this year, on these trends, over 3.5 million, or 15 per cent of Syria's total population, will have become refugees in other countries. And the Foreign Minister of Jordan has warned that

Syrian refugees are likely to make up 40 per cent of his country's population by the middle of next year, with similar numbers predicted for Lebanon.

Mr Speaker, one of two scenarios lies ahead for Syria:

On the one hand an ever-more savage conflict and military stalemate, producing an even bigger humanitarian disaster, greater radicalisation and deeper sectarian divisions, further massacres, and even the collapse of the Syrian state and disintegration of its territory.

Or on the other hand, and what we must strive for, a negotiated end to the conflict which ends the bloodshed and leads to a new transitional government, enabling refugees to return to their homes and extremism to be contained.

All our efforts as the United Kingdom are devoted to bringing about such a political settlement, and to saving lives.

We have provided over £12 million in non-lethal assistance so far, including to the Syrian National Coalition. This includes vehicles with ballistic protection, body armour, trucks and forklifts, solar power generators, water purification kits, equipment to search for survivors in the aftermath of shelling, computers, satellite phones, and office equipment to help people in opposition-held areas.

We have provided human rights training and support to members of Syrian civil society. We have supported human rights investigation teams to collect documentary, photographic and interview evidence of abuses, and trained medical staff to gather forensic evidence of torture and sexual violence. This material is being made available to the UN Commission of Inquiry and other international investigative bodies so that those involved in human rights violations can be held to account. We therefore welcome the resolution sponsored by Qatar which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 15th May, by 107 votes to 12, urging accountability for human rights violations and progress on a political transition as well as humanitarian assistance to Syria.

The Prime Minister announced last week that we would double our non-lethal assistance this year to £20 million. This will be used to help provide services to the Syrian people; to deliver assistance to them on the ground; forge links between different communities and opposition groups; and support better communications.

Our humanitarian funding to date totals £171.1 million, including £30 million also announced by the Prime Minister last week in support for people in need in opposition-held and contested areas inside Syria. Much of our funding is going to support refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. We have already provided food for over 150,000 people, clean drinking water for over 900,000 people, and over 280,000 medical consultations for the sick and injured. The Government has worked hard to urge other countries to meet their commitments to the UN

humanitarian appeal for $1.5 billion. This is now 71 per cent funded, and we will continue to urge other countries to do more.

We are increasing the support we are providing to Syria's neighbours, including providing equipment to the Jordanian Armed Forces to help them deal with the immediate needs of Syrian refugees at the border and transport them safely to international humanitarian organisations. We have provided funding to the Lebanese Armed Forces for four border observation towers, to help reduce cross-border violence in key areas and to protect and reassure local communities. And we are also working with the Syrian National Coalition and key international supporters to develop plans for transition and Syria's post-conflict needs, building on the conference we held at Wilton Park in January.

The international focus must above all be on ending the crisis. To that end, we are stepping up our efforts to support the opposition and increase pressure on the regime, in order to create the conditions for a political transition.

On 20th April I attended the meeting of the Core Group of the Friends of the Syrian people in Istanbul, where a new 'compact' was agreed with the Syrian National Coalition. The Coalition issued a Declaration committing themselves to a political solution and transition; promising to guarantee the rights of all Syria's communities; and rejecting terrorism and extremist ideology. They pledged to preserve the Syrian state, uphold international law, guarantee the safety and security of chemical weapons, and work to keep weapons out of the hands of extremist groups; commitments which I am sure the whole House will welcome. In return, the Core Group nations agreed to expand support to the Coalition and its Military Council, as the United Kingdom already has done. And we are working as I speak to broaden and unify further the Syrian opposition.

On 8th May in Moscow Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov agreed the basis for a new international conference bringing together representatives of the regime and the opposition.

The Prime Minister visited Russia on 10th May for talks with President Putin to cement understanding about the purpose of the conference. He held further talks with President Obama in Washington on 13th May, and spoke again to President Putin last Friday.

In our view the conference, which should be held as soon as possible, should be focussed on agreeing a transitional governing body, with full executive powers and formed by mutual consent, building on the agreement we reached at Geneva last year.

We are urging the regime and the opposition to attend the conference and to take full advantage of the opportunity to negotiate. In the end there will have to be a political and diplomatically-supported solution, if there is to be any solution at all. There is no purely

military victory available to either side without even greater loss of life, the growth of international terrorism and grave threats to neighbouring countries.

The Prime Minister and I have also both spoken to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon about the conference, and we continue to support Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi in his role.

I am in constant contact with Secretary Kerry about the preparations. Tomorrow I will travel to Jordan to meet him and other Foreign Ministers of the Core Group on Wednesday, and on Monday I will go to Brussels for the EU Foreign Affairs Council on this subject. The EU should give strong support to this diplomatic process, including by agreeing further amendments to the arms embargo, without taking any decisions at present to send arms to the Syrian opposition.

The case for further amendments to the arms embargo on Syria is compelling, in order to increase the pressure on the regime, and to give us the flexibility to respond to continued radicalisation and conflict. We have to be open to every way of strengthening moderates and saving lives rather than the current trajectory of extremism and murder.

We have not sent arms to any side during the conflicts of the Arab Spring. No decision has been made to go down this route, and if we were to pursue this, it would be under the following conditions: in coordination with other nations, in carefully controlled circumstances, and in accordance with our obligations under national and international law. The United Kingdom and France are both strongly of the view that changes to the embargo are not separate from the diplomatic work, but essential to it. We must make clear that if the regime does not negotiate seriously at the Geneva conference, no option is off the table.

There remains a serious risk that the Assad regime will not negotiate seriously. This is the lesson of the last two years, in which the regime has shown that it is prepared to countenance any level of loss of life in Syria for as long as it hopes it can win militarily. And we also have to persuade the opposition to come to the table; recognising how difficult it is for them to enter into negotiations with a regime engaged in butchering thousands of people.

There is a growing body of limited but persuasive information showing that the regime used – and continues to use – chemical weapons. We have physiological samples from inside Syria which have shown the use of sarin, although it does not indicate the scale of that use. Our assessment is that chemical weapons use in Syria is very likely to have been by the regime. We have no evidence to date of opposition use. We welcome the UN investigation, which in our view must cover all credible allegations and have access to all relevant sites in Syria. We continue to assist the investigation team and to work with our allies to get more and better information about these allegations.

The United Kingdom holds the Presidency of the UN Security Council next month, and we remain in favour of the Security Council putting its full weight behind a transition plan if it can

be agreed.

Mr Speaker, all our efforts are directed at ensuring that the coming conference in Geneva has the greatest possible chance of success. We are entering in the coming weeks into a period of the most intense diplomacy yet, to bring together permanent members of the UN Security Council, to attempt to create real negotiations, and to open up the possibility of a political solution. The Prime Minister is fully committed personally to these efforts, and the central role of the Foreign Office over the coming weeks will be to support this process. At the same time our work to save lives, to help stabilise neighbouring countries and to support the National Coalition inside Syria will continue to be stepped up.

With every week that passes we are coming closer to the collapse of Syria and a regional catastrophe, with the lives of tens of thousands more Syrians at stake. We are determined to make every effort to end the carnage, to minimise the risks to the region, and to protect the security of the United Kingdom.

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