Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary Statement to Parliament on Syria

2013-03-06

The Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

Mr Speaker with permission I will make a Statement on the crisis in Syria.

The time has come to announce to the House necessary developments in our policy, and our readiness to develop it further if the bloodshed continues.

Two years after it began, the conflict has reached catastrophic proportions.

10,000 people have died since I last updated the House in early January. That means more people have died in the first two months of this year than in the whole of the first year of the conflict. The total estimated death toll is now over 70,000 people.

The regime has used “scud” ballistic missiles against civilian areas. And the UN Commission of Inquiry for Syria has found evidence of grave human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity; including massacres, torture, summary executions and a systematic policy of rape and sexual violence by the regime’s forces and its militia.

A year ago one million people needed humanitarian aid inside Syria. That figure is now up to four million people, out of a total population of 21 million.

40,000 people are fleeing Syria each week; three quarters of them women and children. The number of refugees has increased thirty-fold over the last ten months, and today the sad milestone of one million refugees has been reached. The population of Lebanon, which I visited two weeks ago, has risen by 10% from the influx of destitute people.

This is a desperate situation of increasingly extreme humanitarian suffering.

There is no sign that the Assad regime currently intends to enter into a genuine political process. They appear to believe they can defeat their opponents militarily; and they count on being shielded by some countries at the United Nations Security Council. It will be necessary to turn each of these calculations on its head if the conflict is to come to a peaceful end.

Securing a diplomatic breakthrough remains of course our objective. Last week I discussed Syria with the new US Secretary of State John Kerry here in London, and with other close partners in a core group meeting of the Friends of the Syrian people in Rome. In Rome I also

met the Syrian National Coalition's President Mr al-Khatib, and welcomed his brave announcement that the national coalition is open to direct talks with members of the Assad regime.

We continue our efforts to develop common ground with Russia. I will have talks with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov later this afternoon, and next week with Foreign Minister Lavrov also here in London.

And at the end of January the UN and Arab League Special Representative for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi set out a credible plan for the establishment of a transitional authority in Syria. We are working with allies to achieve if at all possible Security Council backing for a transition process, and I am meeting Mr Brahimi again, also this afternoon.

But the fact remains that diplomacy is taking far too long and the prospect of an immediate breakthrough is slim. Each month of violence in Syria means more death, wider destruction, larger numbers of refugees, and bloodier military confrontation.

The international community cannot stand still in the face of this reality. Our policy has to move towards more active efforts to prevent the loss of life in Syria and this means stepping up our support to the opposition and thereby increasing the pressure on the regime to accept a political solution.

What we face is not a choice between diplomacy on the one hand and practical assistance on the other: helping the opposition is crucial to bringing about a political transition and saving lives, and both must be pursued together.

We will always be careful in how we develop our policy. But our readiness to develop it further should be unmistakable, particularly to the Assad regime.

What happens in Syria is vital to our national interest, for three reasons:

The first is the growth of extremism. We should never forget that the vast majority of people opposing the regime are ordinary people trying to defend their communities and gain freedom for their country. But Syria today has become the top destination for jihadists anywhere in the world, and we are already seeing a rise in sectarian violence and attacks using Improvised Explosive Devices including car bombs. We cannot allow Syria to become another breeding ground for terrorists who pose a threat to our national security.

Second, the crisis is undermining the peace of the region. On top of the refugee crisis, there have been reports of clashes on the Iraqi border and in Lebanon. We are increasingly concerned about the regime's willingness to use chemical weapons. We have warned the Assad regime that the use of chemical weapons would lead to a serious response from the international community. Those who order the use of chemical weapons, and those who use

them, will be held to account. There is also credible information that Iran is providing considerable military support to the regime through its Revolutionary Guard Corps, including personnel, equipment, weapons, and direct financial assistance.

Third, we and our allies must always be prepared to respond to situations of extreme humanitarian distress. Our foreign policy is inseparable from upholding human rights, protecting lives, and supporting international law. We must assist the genuine moderate and democratic forces in Syria who are in dire need of help and who feel abandoned by the international community. The longer this conflict goes on, the more human suffering, persecution of minorities, radicalisation and sectarian conflict there will be.

Despite these three compelling arguments there will still be those who say that Britain should have nothing to do with Syria.

But we cannot look the other way while international law and human rights are flouted.

We cannot step back from a crisis that could destabilise the heart of the Middle East.

And it would be the height of irresponsibility to ignore potential threats to our own security.

So I want to explain to the House today the next step in increasing our support to the Syrian people; and I emphasise that there may well have to be further steps.

We have contributed nearly £140 million in humanitarian aid so far. This is funding food, clean drinking water, medical assistance, blankets, and shelter for many tens of thousands of people. We are supporting the Syrian National Coalition’s own efforts to deliver aid inside Syria. And we will seek new ways to relieve the humanitarian crisis and to expand access for aid across the country, while preparing to help a future government deal with the aftermath of the conflict.

We have also committed a total of £9.4 million so far in non-lethal support to the Syrian opposition, civil society and human rights defenders, such as power generators and communications kit. We have trained more than 300 Syrian journalists and activists. And we are providing satellite communication devices to document human rights violations and abuses.

I informed the House in January that we would seek to amend the European Union sanctions on Syria to open up the possibility of further assistance if the situation deteriorated.

On Thursday we finalised with our European partners a specific exemption to the EU sanctions, to permit the provision of non-lethal military equipment and all forms of technical assistance to the Syrian National Coalition where it is intended for the protection of civilians.

This is an important advance in our ability to support the opposition and help save lives.

Such technical assistance can include assistance, advice and training on how to maintain security in areas no longer controlled by the regime, on coordination between civilian and military councils, on how to protect civilians and minimise the risks to them, and how to maintain security during a transition.

We will now provide such assistance, advice and training.

We intend to respond to the opposition's request to provide equipment for search and rescue operations, and incinerators and refuse collection kit to prevent the spread of disease. We will help local councils to access funds and equipment to repair electricity and water supplies to homes. And we will also respond to the opposition's request for further water purification kits, and equipment to help civilian political leaders operate and communicate.

We will also now provide new types of non-lethal equipment for the protection of civilians, going beyond what we have given before. In conjunction with the National Coalition, we are identifying the protective equipment which will be of most assistance to them, and likely to save most lives. I will keep the House updated, but it will certainly include, for instance, armoured four-wheel drive vehicles to help opposition figures move around more freely, as well as personal protection equipment including body armour.

We will now also be able to provide testing equipment to the opposition to enable evidence gathering in the horrific event of chemical weapons use.

And we will also fund training to help armed groups understand their responsibilities and obligations under international law and international human rights standards. Any human rights violations or abuses are unacceptable on all sides.

We have allocated nearly £3 million in funding this month to support this work, and an additional £10 million hereafter, comprising $20 million in non-lethal equipment and practical support for the Syrian opposition and civil society on top of the $60 million just announced by the United States. We hope other countries will offer similar assistance.

The Cabinet is in no doubt that this is a necessary, proportionate and lawful response to a situation of extreme humanitarian suffering, and that there is no practicable alternative. All our assistance will be carefully calibrated and monitored as well as legal, and will be aimed at saving life, alleviating this human catastrophe and supporting moderate groups.

The process of amending the EU sanctions regime in this way was difficult and the decision came down to the wire. We persisted with it because we believe that it is preferable to have a united EU approach. In our view if a political solution to the crisis in Syria is not found and the conflict continues, we and the rest of the European Union will have to be ready to move further, and we should not rule out any option for saving lives.

In the case that further necessary amendments to the EU sanctions regime prove impossible to agree, we stand ready to take any domestic measures necessary to ensure that core sanctions on Syria remain effective.

This is a situation in Syria where extreme humanitarian distress and growing dangers to international peace and security must weigh increasingly heavily in the balance against other risks.

With this crisis now becoming one of major dimensions by any standard, with millions of people on the move, many tens of thousands dead, tens of thousands more in daily danger of losing their lives, the world's most volatile region in growing tension, and political deadlock that has endured for two years, our policy cannot be static nor our position indifferent.

A situation of growing gravity requires a steadily more active approach, learning the lessons of previous conflicts, and always emphasising the need for a political and diplomatic resolution of the crisis, but crucially also being prepared to use increased pressure and levers to try to bring this about.

We will continue to keep the House properly informed as we press for an end to the conflict, provide life-saving assistance, and work to ensure that Syria has the political transition its people need and deserve and which they have now waited far too long to see achieved.

Further Information

Read comments made by the

Foreign Secretary and US Secretary of State at a February press conference

Read about

UK aid to support Syrian refugees in Lebanon

More information about the

UN Commission of Inquiry report on Syria

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