Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

# Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on Middle East and North Africa

2011-06-07

In the statement to the House of Commons on 7 June the Foreign Secretary said:

“On Saturday I visited Benghazi with my Rt Hon Friend the International Development Secretary. We went to show our support for the people of Libya and for their legitimate representatives, the National Transitional Council. Our overriding impression was of a great sense of optimism among ordinary Libyans who are hopeful that Qadhafi will leave and deeply grateful for what the UK has done. I pay tribute to the brave men and women of our Armed Forces and to our diplomats and aid workers in Benghazi, for their courageous work.

Benghazi is functioning well under the circumstances, with police visible on the streets, many shops and restaurants open and food staples in good supply. We also noted a dramatic expansion of civil society groups who rightly see themselves as one of the key building blocks of a free Libya.

The UK’s approach is as I have set out many times before. We continue to take robust action to implement UN Security Council resolution 1973, which authorises military action to put in place a no-fly zone to prevent air attacks on Libyan people, and all necessary measures to stop attacks on civilians while ruling out an occupation force. The case for this action remains utterly compelling.

Operating strictly within the limits of the UN Resolution, we are steadily intensifying the military, economic and diplomatic pressure on the Qadhafi regime.

We have increased the tempo of air strikes against regime forces. These are currently taking place at a rate of approximately 50 strike missions per day, and include the targeting of military command and control sites in Tripoli, regime tanks, artillery, rocket launchers and armoured fighting vehicles. Nearly 10,000 sorties have been carried out since March 31st, including more than 3,700 strike sorties, on top of operations to disrupt regime military activity and arms shipments at sea. On 1st June the North Atlantic Council agreed unanimously to extend NATO’s operations for a further 90 days from 27th June.

It is right that we ensure that our military operations are as effective as possible and that we adapt our tactics as the regime forces change theirs. Last week Britain deployed Apache

helicopters to operations in Libya alongside French helicopters, which is enabling the precise and potent targeting of regime forces.

The Qadhafi regime is isolated and on the defensive. Last week a number of senior military officers abandoned it, including five generals. The Head of the National Oil Corporation also recently fled Libya. On 17 May, ARABSAT joined European satellite companies in suspending Libyan State TV broadcasts, a significant blow to Qadhafi's ability to carry out psychological warfare, and we press all satellite companies to take similar action.

British humanitarian support has already played a vital role in Libya. My Rt Hon Friend the International Development Secretary has announced further assistance to protect 200,000 people in Misrata and elsewhere from landmines. We have deployed an International Stabilisation Response Team to Benghazi which is leading the international effort to plan detailed assistance for Libya when the conflict comes to an end, ensuring that clear plans are in place for the international community to support. Separately we are providing additional communications equipment, uniforms and bullet proof vests to help the National Transitional Council develop responsible security forces and to protect civilians.

In our meetings we found the NTC focussed on Libya's future. They have published a Road Map for a transition to democracy, with an interim government including some technocratic members of the regime and elections. We have advised them to develop their proposed transition in more detail to ensure that comprehensive plans are in place.

Any political settlement in Libya requires an end to violence and Qadhafi's departure. At the G8 summit in Deauville on 26 May, participants including Russia agreed that Qadhafi has lost all legitimacy and must go.

On 23rd May at the Foreign Affairs Council the EU agreed to intensify efforts to block the regime's access to resources, funding, military hardware and mercenaries. And today the EU added six regime-controlled port authorities in western Libya to the EU sanctions lists. This will help to prevent the regime from acquiring military resources and will support the protection of Libyan civilians.

The next meeting of the Libya Contact Group will take place on Thursday in the United Arab Emirates, where Britain will call for all this international pressure to be maintained and intensified. The House should be in no doubt that the efforts of Britain and our partners are saving lives and enforcing UN resolutions. Had we not acted the bloodshed would have been far greater and the consequences for Libya's neighbours and the entire region would have been extremely serious.

The Qadhafi regime is not the only government seeking to suppress peaceful protest. Scores of people were killed in Syria over the weekend after demonstrations involving tens of thousands of people. Members on all sides will have been horrified by the killing of many

children and the death of 13 year old Hamza al-Khateeb who was allegedly tortured. The regime is using live fire against protestors and blocking UN efforts to get help to those in need. There have been reports overnight that a number of security force personnel have been killed in the town of Jisr al Shughour close to the Turkish border, and we call for restraint from all sides in response to this incident.

Since my last Statement our efforts to agree EU sanctions against President Assad and other individuals responsible for the violence and repression in Syria have been successful. We are exploring with our European partners the potential for further sanctions if the violence continues.

Britain has circulated a draft UN Security Council Resolution condemning the repression in Syria and calling for the Syrian Government to meet their people's legitimate demands, release all prisoners of conscience, lift restrictions on the media and Internet and co-operate with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The House will appreciate that a Resolution is not in our gift, and needs the support of nine UN Security Council members and no vetoes. We are working to persuade other countries that the Security Council has a responsibility to speak out. President Assad is losing legitimacy and should reform or step aside.

We must show the same resolve and purpose in supporting change and democratic development elsewhere in the region, for example using the economic appeal of the EU to act as a magnet for positive change in the region. We welcome the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy that was issued on 25 May. It includes many British proposals and follows weeks of intensive engagement by Ministers, including the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. It offers a new partnership with based on progressively greater economic integration, including trade, and increased funding for the Southern Neighbourhood of €750 million. It links EU support with progress on political and economic reform, and includes a Civil Society Facility and a European Endowment for Democracy to help fund new political parties and small NGOs.

The G8 Summit agreed the Deauville Partnership, which will provide over $20 billion dollars in vital assistance to Tunisia and Egypt and countries which commit to more open and democratic government.

And in February I announced Britain's new Arab Partnership Initiative to support civil society and democratic development in the region with initial funding of £5 million. The Prime Minister announced at the G8 that we will increase this funding more than twenty-fold, expanding it to £110 million over four years. This fund will provide support for lasting political and economic reform through the building blocks of democracy: independent institutions, political pluralism, free media and economic fairness and opportunity. It includes up to £40 million to work with parliaments, civil society, human rights groups and reforming governments. And it includes up

to £70 million to support growth and tackle the fundamental problems which leave so many millions of young people across the region out of a job. This is in our vital national interest as well as true to our values.

Tunisia has made significant progress towards a more democratic society, but there is risk of political reform being destabilised by economic challenges. In Egypt there have been further demonstrations calling for faster political and economic reforms and a revised electoral time table. We are concerned that planned Parliamentary elections in September will be too early to allow political parties to organise their activity and contest the elections. The Prime Minister and I have pressed the Egyptian authorities to ensure an open and plural election process.

The situation in Yemen is extremely uncertain following President Saleh's departure to Saudi Arabia to receive medical treatment and his transfer of authority to the Vice President. We urge the Vice President to work closely with all sides to implement the Gulf Cooperation Council Agreement and to begin political transition now. Yemen faces huge humanitarian and economic challenges and the Yemeni government needs to dedicate all its efforts to confront the impending crisis, with international support.

Recent events have shown just how quickly the security situation in Yemen can deteriorate into ferocious and unpredictable fighting. It is of the utmost importance that all British nationals leave the country immediately by commercial means while it is still possible to do so, as we have advised them to do since 12 March. I warn again that it will be extremely unlikely that the British Government will be able to evacuate British nationals from Yemen.

We are also concerned about developments in Bahrain, particularly the arrest and trial of a large number of politicians, doctors and nurses and allegations of torture. I raised our concern and the need for the Government to meet all its human rights obligations when I saw the Crown Prince of Bahrain last month. I also emphasised the need for a long-term political solution that builds bridges between the different religious communities. I welcome the lifting of the State of National Safety on 1 June and the announcement by The King of Bahrain that a comprehensive and inclusive National Dialogue will start on 1 July. Urgent dialogue on genuine political reform is the only way to address the legitimate concerns of the Bahraini people and ensure long-term stability.

With a month to go before South Sudanese independence on 9 July, we have made strong representations about the violence in Abyei and Southern Kordofan. I met the Sudanese Foreign Minister yesterday and urged a peaceful and durable solution for Abyei and agreement on outstanding areas of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This is only more urgent following the very worrying reports received just this morning of renewed fighting in Southern Kordofan. We are in touch with the UN mission in Sudan and are monitoring these developments closely. I urge both sides to cease all hostilities immediately and return to negotiations under the auspices of the African Union.

The Arab Spring underlines the importance of a breakthrough on the Middle East Peace Process. This long standing conflict needs to be resolved, through negotiations, to give the Palestinian people the state that they need and deserve and the Israeli people long term security and peace. The status quo is not sustainable, nor will these populations be immune from the effects of change and instability elsewhere. We strongly support President Obama's recent statement that negotiations should be on the basis of 1967 lines with mutually agreed land swaps and proper security arrangements, and along with France and Germany we are pressing the parties to return to the table.

The new Palestinian Authority should be composed of independent figures on the basis that President Abbas set out on 4 May. As was the case with the outgoing Authority, it should uphold the principle of non-violence, be committed to a negotiated two-state solution, and accept previous agreements of the PLO. Hamas will remain a proscribed terrorist organisation unless and until they abandon violence and commit to a two state solution, and we call again for the immediate release of Gilad Shalit. The UK will judge a future Palestinian government by its actions and its readiness to work for peace. I am also concerned by this weekend's violence in the Golan Heights resulting in many deaths. We continue to urge restraint and call for the avoidance of the lethal use of force.

There must also be no let up in our efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Iran is combining brutal suppression of opposition leaders at home with the provision of equipment and technical advice to help the Syrian regime crush protests in Syria. This is unacceptable, and compounds our concern about Iran's behaviour and its intentions over its nuclear programme. We support peaceful pressure on Iran to persuade it to negotiate, backed by the offer by the UK, US, Russia, China, France and Germany to reach an agreement through talks. That is why the UK has recently helped to extend Iran sanctions in the EU, with over 100 new designations, whilst also keeping the door open to further negotiations. Until Iran negotiates seriously international pressure against it will only increase.

In all these countries Britain's approach in the coming months will be consistent and determined. We will support greater economic and political freedom while anticipating and addressing threats to our own security, and we will work with our allies to protect our nation's interests while standing up for the highest values of our society.

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