Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on Iran and Syria

2013-11-11

The Foreign Secretary said:

Mr Speaker, with permission I will update the House on developments in the Iran nuclear negotiations and our work to bring together a peace conference on Syria.

I returned yesterday from E3+3 negotiations with Iran in Geneva. This was the third round of talks in the last month, and it began last Thursday at official level. On Friday and Saturday E3+3 Foreign Ministers joined the Iranian Foreign Minister at the negotiations.

The threat of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is one of the greatest dangers to the peace and security of the world. That is why we must build momentum behind the Geneva negotiations, and why we and Iran must ensure that the opportunity of making progress does not slip away in the coming weeks.

We had two days of intensive negotiations with Iran, which finished in the early hours of yesterday morning. These were complex and detailed discussions, covering every aspect of Iran’s nuclear programme. Our aim is to produce an interim first step agreement with Iran that can then create the confidence and space to negotiate a comprehensive and final settlement.

The talks broke up without reaching that interim agreement, because some gaps between the parties remain. While I cannot go into the details of the discussions while the talks continue I can say that most of those gaps are now narrow, and many others were bridged altogether during the negotiations. As we concluded the negotiations on Saturday night all six E3+3 Foreign Ministers presented the same united position to Iran, which gives an extremely strong foundation for the next round of talks on 20th November.

I pay tribute to Baroness Ashton and my Foreign Minister colleagues, including Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif. He is a tough but constructive negotiator, who displayed a sincere and open approach throughout the talks. He and I took the opportunity to discuss further the bilateral relationship between Britain and Iran, and today both our Governments have formally appointed our new Chargé d’affaires. I expect the

new UK Chargé

to make his first visit to Iran this month.

The Government is firmly in favour of reaching an interim agreement with Iran, as an essential step towards a comprehensive settlement.

But given the extensive nature of Iran's programme and the history of its concealment, the detailed terms of any agreement matter greatly. An agreement has to be clear and detailed, cover all aspects of Iran's programme, and give assurance to the whole world that the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran is fully addressed. Such a deal is on the table, and there is no doubt in my mind that it can be reached. I am convinced that the agreement we were discussing would be good for the security of the entire world, and we will pursue it with energy and persistence.

An interim agreement would involve offering Iran limited, proportionate sanctions relief. In the meantime though, we will be vigilant and firm in upholding the international sanctions which have played an indispensable part in creating this new opening with Iran. Sanctions are costing the Iranian economy at least $4 billion a month and this cost will be maintained until we reach an agreement. Until such a moment, there is no question of us relaxing the pressure of sanctions in any way.

We are determined to take every opportunity to reach a diplomatic settlement to the Iranian nuclear crisis, because the alternatives – nuclear proliferation or conflict – could be disastrous for the peace and security of the world, including the stability of the Middle East.

That stability is being severely undermined by the deepening crisis in Syria. Our objectives there remain to reach a political settlement to the conflict, thereby also protecting UK national security, to alleviate the desperate humanitarian suffering, and to prevent the further use of chemical weapons.

On 22nd October I hosted a meeting of the

Foreign Ministers of the 11 countries of the Core Group of the Friends of Syria

, as well as the President and senior leadership of the Syrian National Coalition.

We gave our united support to the UN-led Geneva II process, which should establish a transitional governing body with full executive powers, formed by mutual consent. There was unanimous agreement that Assad and his close associates can play no role in a body formed by mutual consent. We also agreed to provide the National Coalition with additional political and practical support to give the Geneva conference the best chance of success, and urged the Coalition to commit itself to taking part in it.

It has now done that, which I strongly welcome. Last night, its members agreed by consensus at a General Assembly to attend the Geneva II talks, on the basis that this meant that Assad and those with blood on their hands would have no role in a transition. They also rightly

called for humanitarian access and the release of detainees ahead of Geneva II. We continue to push for a date for a peace conference to be agreed, and UN and Arab League Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has reiterated that he is still trying to convene a conference before the end of the year.

In the light of this decision by the Coalition, we will provide practical and political support to help them prepare to lead the opposition delegation. I will shortly lay before Parliament a proposal to increase our non-lethal support to the Supreme Military Council of General Idris. This life-saving equipment will take the form of communications, medical and logistics equipment. There can be no peaceful settlement to the conflict in Syria without a strong role for the legitimate, moderate opposition. I also welcome the vote last night by the National Coalition to confirm the inclusion of the Kurdish National Council and their ranks, which adds further to their broad representation of Syrian people.

We are also particularly determined to ensure that the peace talks include a direct role for women's groups, in accordance with Security Council decisions on Women, Peace and Security. It is vital that women participate fully in the future government and institutions of Syria, as they have an indispensable role to play in rebuilding and reconciling Syrian society. We are ready to work with Mr Brahimi, his team, international NGOs and other countries to make this a reality. We will also work with the UN and its Agencies to ensure that we give the women's groups the support they need to participate effectively. In addition, we are encouraging the Syrian National Coalition to include women members in its delegation.

So far we have committed over £20 million to support opposition groups, civil society, human rights defenders and media activists in Syria. This ranges from training and equipping search and rescue teams to providing up to £1 million to help survivors of sexual violence gain access to justice, and we will develop this assistance further.

The humanitarian situation in Syria is one of unimaginable distress and suffering. Well over 100,000 people have died, and 11.5 million people – more than half of Syria's population are now in desperate need of assistance either inside the country or as refugees in the region.

The UN estimates that 2.5 million people are trapped in areas in Syria which aid is not reaching, including an estimated 500,000 men women and children living under siege conditions. Severe acute malnutrition is emerging among children, and polio has reappeared fourteen years after the country was certified free of the disease.

Appalling human rights violations are being committed, including the use of incendiary bombs against civilians, torture, rape, massacres and summary executions, and attacks on hospitals, schools and aid convoys. The regime has shown that it can facilitate access to chemical weapons inspectors when it wishes, and it could do so for humanitarian relief if it showed a shred of humanity and wished to do so.

We need to address this crisis to save lives, and also to improve the prospects for the Geneva talks. On 2nd October we helped to secure a UN Security Council Presidential Statement which said that humanitarian aid must be able to reach all Syrians. This Statement is clearly not being implemented. I spoke last week to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov urging his government to try to persuade the regime to stop blocking the delivery of aid, and we would like to see stronger action in the UN Security Council, including a Resolution if necessary.

In the Security Council and through all other avenues available to us we will press for full humanitarian access and freedom of movement for trapped civilians, the evacuation of civilians from besieged areas, safe passage for medical personnel and convoys, the creation of hubs for the delivery of aid, cross-border assistance and the lifting of bureaucratic burdens imposed by the regime. We will also work with the Coalition to improve access to aid in areas under its control.

The

UK is contributing £500 million to relief efforts

, much of it to assist neighbouring countries, and the international community has provided $3 billion in funding for this year. But the fact that the existing UN appeal for this year is still nearly $2 billion short underlines just how extreme the humanitarian crisis is and we call on all countries to do more.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have confirmed that the destruction of Syria's declared chemical weapons production, mixing and filling equipment is now complete. But some warheads and all of the bulk chemical agents and precursors remain, and must be eliminated. The UK has provided £2.4million of support to this process, and we will continue to support the mission until Syria's chemical weapons capability is eradicated.

Diplomatic progress on all of these issues often seems intractable and difficult, but it is vital that diplomacy succeeds, and we will persist undeterred by the frustrations and delays.

At the same time we will strongly support the Middle East Peace Process, which remains central to international peace and security. We do not underestimate

the challenges, but firmly believe that if Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas show further bold leadership, a negotiated two state solution is possible. We are working with European partners to provide practical support to both sides, including bilateral assistance to the institutions of a future Palestinian state.

We are likely to face a long period of turbulence in many areas of the Middle East in the coming years, and if we do not succeed in diplomatic solutions in these three crucial conflicts and potential conflicts then the outlook would be dark indeed, for the region and for the peace and security of the world. In the coming weeks we will maintain every possible effort to succeed.

Further information

Read about how the

UK is responding to the humanitarian crisis in Syria

Visit the

UK for Iranians website

Visit the

UK and Syria website

Follow the Foreign Secretary on twitter

@WilliamJHague

Follow the Foreign Office on twitter

@foreignoffice

Follow the Foreign Office on

facebook

and

Google+

Media enquiries

For journalists

Email

newsdesk@fco.gov.uk

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-updates-parliament-on-iran-and-syria