

Syria—Crisis in Aleppo

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Foreign Affairs

December 15, 2016

The Honorable Senator Mobina S. B. Jaffer:

Honourable senators, my question is also for the leader in the Senate.

Leader, we all know that as we sit here the tragedy in Aleppo is happening. I know for all of us the shine of Christmas festivities have diminished as a result.

Rupert Colville, the UN human rights office spokesperson, just reported that on Monday alone, pro-government forces operating in Aleppo have executed 82 civilians, including 13 children and 11 women. Although evacuation efforts are ongoing, the safety of 80,000 civilians trapped in a few square miles of East Aleppo under rebel control remains uncertain, especially as the Syrian Army advances over the district as we speak, with the help of Russia.

Honourable senators, we cannot stand by and watch as Aleppo becomes the scene of horrifying atrocities. These events bring memories of brutal genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994, where an estimated 800,000 people died.

Leader, what is our government doing to help people in Aleppo?

Hon. Peter Harder (Government Representative in the Senate): Again, I thank the honourable senator for her important question on this tragedy. The honourable senator, and I'm sure all senators, would agree with the Government of Canada in that it is appalled by the horrific civilian massacres of the Assad regime and its backers like Russia and Iran. They must be held to account and abide by Canada's and the world's call to uphold international humanitarian law and protect citizens and rescue workers.

To this end, the government is providing life-saving humanitarian assistance and bringing accountability by supporting evidence gathering of these war crimes and have welcomed tens of thousands of Syrian refugees to Canada.

On December 9, just last week, the Government of Canada led a United Nations General Assembly resolution that mobilized the support of 122 countries and passed it, demanding an immediate cessation of hostilities and unhindered access for humanitarian aid.

As you know, the government is part of the International Syria Support Group and its humanitarian and ceasefire task forces. The government has also committed some \$840 million in humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable in the region, and they have marshalled the support of 71 countries at a session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Clearly the government remains in close contact with the United Nations humanitarian coordinator to maintain support. This situation is evolving tragically, and we must all be vigilant in the coming days.

Senator Jaffer: Thank you for that comprehensive answer. I appreciate that.

Leader, I know you were part of this group when Foreign Affairs was developing the responsibility to protect. What happened to that? Have we forgotten that Canada was at the forefront of going to the UN to say that every sovereign nation has a responsibility to protect the vulnerable? What happened to that?

Senator Harder: Again, thank you for the question. It's a subject worthy of a broader discussion.

It's important to remember that the responsibility to protect was based on the notion of a request from the United Nations, and that responsibility is not unilateral in that regard. There has not at this stage been a United Nations call for protection because of the powers of certain member states to thwart such a United Nations call.

It is in that context that responsibility to protect isn't the appropriate mechanism for Canada's response at this time. Of course, should the United Nations issue such a call, Canada would indeed be part of moving forward, I am certain.

Biography

Senator

Mobina S. B. Jaffer