

Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary session on the situation in Syria

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Check against delivery!

Thank you Mr President.

This week marks the tragic anniversary of the Syrian war. It has been seven years, and the war is not over yet. After encouraging signs of de-escalation in the second half of last year, we have been warning last month, as the European Union, about the risks of a new escalation and we have tried to prevent it, mainly with our work in the Security Council of the United Nations that led to the adoption of the Security Council Resolution 2401.

What we see today is a dramatic re-escalation of the military activities. Afrin first, then the tragedy of Eastern Ghouta.

And with every new escalation, a new level of horror is reached. In Eastern Ghouta we have witnessed the intentional bombing of civilians and medical facilities and snipers shooting on those trying to flee. Now there is only one rational and moral thing we can do. We can only keep working with the United Nations to achieve what was not achieved so far. A political solution, in Geneva, as the foundation of a just and lasting peace.

We believe the most urgent task now is to stop the fighting and bring relief to the civilian population. At the end of February, as I mentioned, the UN Security Council adopted unanimously – also thanks to our work, the work of our Member States - Resolution 2401, demanding a 30-day cessation of hostilities all around Syria, with the only exclusion of operations against Daesh and Al Qaeda.

At our meeting of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers, our Foreign Affairs Council, on 26 February we were united in calling for full and immediate implementation of the Resolution. On the same day, right after we met, I wrote to the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey – the three guarantors of the Astana process. Because they have committed to creating four de-escalation zones in Syria - and let me recall that Eastern Ghouta is one of these four zones - they have taken a clear responsibility, and we expect them to fulfil it.

In my letter, I have called on them to contribute to the full and immediate implementation of the Security Council Resolution. This includes taking all necessary steps to ensure that the fighting stops, that humanitarian access is ensured, and to allow for life saving deliveries of assistance and medical evacuations.

In Eastern Ghouta, over a thousand people are now in need of evacuation, as doctors, medicines and medical appliances are lacking. Thanks also to our work, together with the United Nations, on the first days of March, a UN aid convoy was finally allowed to enter Douma. It was the first aid convoy since November, and it brought some much-needed relief to thousands of people trapped in Eastern Ghouta. Our first concern is always saving life, is always the humanitarian need. But the shelling resumed while the operations were still ongoing, and the convoy had to leave before the aid could be fully unloaded.

This shows that a daily 5-hour truce can well be a first step, but it is clearly not sufficient. Syria needs a full cessation of hostilities, as agreed by the UN Security Council. It is also unacceptable that the Syrian regime removed critical medical items from the convoy, in clear violation of International Humanitarian Law.

As our diplomatic work for a truce continues every single day, as our humanitarian support to Syrians continues, we must also keep focusing on peace talks on a political solution in Geneva. I know it is difficult to talk about peace negotiations and even more to engage in peace negotiations, while thousands are still dying. But let us keep in mind two things: first, that peace is all the more urgent when the fighting gets worse. And second, that peace can only come from a comprehensive political agreement under UN auspices.

I believe we should have learnt it by now: limited agreements, yes, open windows of hope, and limited improvement. But they have always collapsed, in the lack of a larger political agreement on the future of Syria. The new escalation of violence – in Eastern Ghouta, but also in Afrin – can push further away the chances for a political solution to the conflict and can easily lead to an even more dramatic escalation, even in these hours.

Now we need to concentrate all our energies in supporting and revitalising the UN-led negotiations in Geneva, in a determined and consistent manner, gathering the efforts of all the partners in the region and in the international community.

Supporting Geneva will be one of the key goals at the Second Brussels Conference we will host on the future of Syria and the region at the end of April. We will gather the international community, the regional players, around three objectives. First, to renew our humanitarian support to the people of Syria, both inside Syria and in the neighbouring countries. Second, we will work on the recovery of areas where the fighting has ended, particularly the areas liberated from Daesh, bringing back services and normal life to communities - men, women, children that aspire to a sort of normal life.

Reconstruction, as we said very clearly several times - and we will repeat in Brussels in the end of April - will only begin after a credible and inclusive political agreement has been reached. But the perspective of reconstruction can help the Geneva Process – and this is why we continue to work also to prepare for peace as the most powerful leverage we have to encourage a positive dynamic and outcome of negotiations.

This is the third objective, actually the first one, of the Brussels conference in April: use our convening power, which is quite remarkable, together with the United Nations to unite a real international and regional consensus to give a political push to intra-Syria negotiations in Geneva. Not because we are naive, or blind. On the contrary, after seven years, we know how difficult it is to end this war. And even those that had tried partial, political avenues to gather different formats have realised very clearly the limits of this exercise.

It is only through a collective UN effort that we can get there. But we know that it would be simply impossible to bring peace to Syria without everyone's contribution. This is why we are insisting on this strong political commitment to negotiations to be expressed in a united manner at the Brussels Conference coming up in a couple of months from now. Because we cannot afford to stop working for peace. And it is exactly in the darkest moments that the work for peace is most needed. We, the European Union, do not give up on the Syrian people and will call to the rest of the world to do the same.

Thank you.

Link to the video: <https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I152089>.

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