Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on Syria

2012-09-03

With permission Madame Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on Syria.

More than 20,000 people have now died in the conflict in Syria, up to 1.5 million are internally displaced and 230,000 have fled to Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan. According to the UN, 2.5 million people in Syria need urgent humanitarian assistance - double the number in March - and fewer than half of Syrian primary health-care facilities and hospitals are now fully functional.

The regime is using indiscriminate shelling, aircraft, helicopter gunships and militias to terrorise civilians. There are reports of up to 400 people slaughtered in a single atrocity in the town of Darayya.

Our objective remains an end to the violence and a transition to a more democratic and stable Syria. This is the only way to avoid protracted civil war, the collapse of the Syrian state, an even greater exodus of refugees and further appalling loss of life.

This is not just our view or the view of other Western countries, it is the view of the Arab League and the vast majority of UN member states. And I particularly welcome the recent strong statement by President Mursi of Egypt condemning the Assad regime’s actions.

Despite our best efforts the United Nations Security Council has been unable to put its full weight and authority behind a peaceful resolution of the crisis. On three occasions we have tried with our allies to adopt a Security Council Resolution that would require the regime to begin a political transition, rather than simply call on it to do so. On each occasion Russia and China have used their vetoes, most recently on the 19th July. It is a terrible indictment of the Council that approximately a quarter of all those who have been killed in Syria died in the month following the last vetoed resolution.

We continue to urge Russia and China to work with us to end the crisis and to allow the Security Council to live up to its responsibilities, a case the Prime Minister made to President Putin during August and a case I made again at the Security Council in New York last week. We are also working closely with the new UN/Arab League Special Representative Mr Lakhdar Brahimi, who I met in New York last week as well.

But in the absence of that international unity, we have sharply increased our work to help the people of Syria in five areas:

Helping to create the conditions for a political transition;

Providing further humanitarian aid;

Increasing the pressure on the regime;

Supporting justice for victims human rights violations;

And planning assistance to a future Syrian government.

In each case our actions are carefully coordinated with our partners, and I organised a conference call in mid-August with Secretary Clinton and the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany and Turkey to ensure that that is the case.

I will briefly take each of these five areas in turn.

First, a political transition requires the Assad regime to stop the violence. But it also requires Syria's opposition groups to win the trust of the Syrian people and provide a united and viable political alternative. So we are greatly increasing our work with opposition groups and political activists from Syria.

The UK's own Special Representative to the Syrian Opposition continues to meet oppositionist groups in the region, and last month I authorised his first limited contacts with political representatives of the Free Syria Army outside the country.

On 10th August I announced an extra £5 million pounds in non-lethal practical assistance to help protect unarmed opposition groups and human rights activists in Syria, including communications equipment, training to support the documentation of human rights violations, and other equipment for civilians. Communications equipment is en route to Syria as I speak.

We have already trained over 60 Syrian activists in documenting human rights violations, and provided support including equipment for 100 Syrian citizen journalists to report on events in Syria. Activists who helped investigate the massacre in El-Houleh for example were trained by the United Kingdom.

The new assistance I announced on 10th August is designed to support similar work and to help save lives. All the support we provide will be carefully targeted, coordinated with like-minded countries, consistent with our laws and values, and based on rigorous analysis and risk assessment.

Second, action to address the humanitarian crisis. The UK is the second largest bilateral donor to the Syrian people. Since July our aid has provided food to over 145,000 people,

water and sanitation for up to 60,000 people, and health care for over 50,000 people.

In August my right honourable friend the International Development Secretary announced a four-fold increase in UK assistance for Syrian refugees. And at the UN Security Council last week I announced a further increase in UK aid from £27.5 million to £30.5 million. It includes £2 million in new funding for medical aid inside Syria and £1 million for refugees in Jordan, particularly those who have been victims of sexual violence - a particular focus for our Government ahead of the UK's G8 Presidency in 2013.

As I saw when I visited the Jordanian border with Syria last month to meet refugees, the need is growing. As of last week, the $180 million UN Humanitarian Response Plan was only half funded. There is an urgent need for other countries to help make up the shortfall. To that end in New York I proposed with the French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius that Development Ministers and UN agencies meet to help generate donations and coordinate assistance.

And through the Conflict Pool, we are also increasing our bilateral support to the Government and Armed Forces of Lebanon as they grapple with insecurity caused by Syria's conflict.

Third, the UK has been at the forefront of efforts to isolate the Assad regime and cut off its finance. We have led the way on 17 rounds of EU sanctions on Syria since last May, targeting now 155 individuals and 55 entities close to the regime.

Senior Syrian military officers and diplomats are joining senior members of the government in courageously turning their back on Assad, including former Prime Minister Riad Hijab. Foreign Minister Fabius and I also called at the UN for others around Bashar Al-Assad to follow Mr Hijab's example and disassociate themselves from the regime.

This leads into our fourth area of work, supporting justice for the Syrian people and helping to deter crimes.

The UN Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry has reported human rights violations on an appalling scale by the regime and its militia, and also abuses by some armed groups.

A list of individuals and units believed to be responsible for human rights violations and abuses will be submitted by the Commission at the end of this month, for the purposes of holding to account those responsible for atrocities. We strongly believe that the Commission's mandate should be extended so it can continue this vital work.

We also support the initiative by the Swiss Government to build momentum for a referral of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, and urge others to join these efforts. If these do not succeed we look forward to a day when a different kind of government in place in Syria will take responsibility for voluntarily referring the situation to the International Criminal Court.

The UK’s expert Human Rights Monitoring mission visited the region earlier this year. We will continue to work to help improve the quality of information and evidence gathered by Syrian human rights activists which may be used in a future accountability process.

Fifth, Assad’s departure from power is inevitable. His regime is doomed, and the international community must plan rapid support to a new government in Syria now.

Any such government will face a broad range of challenges from reforming the security sector and restoring health and education services, to ensuring people have shelter, water and food.

So FCO officials are working closely with DFID, MOD and the Stabilisation Unit, and also with key allies in the Friends of Syria including regional countries, so that we develop and coordinate plans for assistance now.

Madame Deputy Speaker, this crisis began when the people of Syria demanded their legitimate rights and freedoms. The Assad regime has tried to crush their aspirations and extinguish their hope. We will use all diplomatic means available to us to help them, working with the UN, the Friends of Syria Group, the European Union, Arab countries and key allies such as France, the United States and Turkey. As I have said to the House before, we have not ruled out any options as this crisis deepens. At the UN General Assembly later this month we will seek once again to generate the determined, concerted international action that the situation demands and that Syrian people have every right to expect.

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