Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary: We cannot allow chemical weapons to be used with impunity

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In a news interview today, Foreign Secretary William Hague spoke about the need for a strong international response to the chemical weapons attack near Damascus on 21 August.

The Foreign Secretary said:

“We are clear in the British Government that it was the Assad regime that carried out this chemical attack, large scale chemical attack, last Wednesday that has led to the deaths, the agonising deaths, of so many hundreds of people including, tragically, so many children. All of the evidence points in that direction, in that one direction. The eye witness accounts, the fact this area was under bombardment by the regime forces at the time that the chemical attack took place. It all points in that direction to the responsibility of the regime and, of course, this is a regime that possesses chemical weapons stockpiles and has used chemical weapons in the past including on a smaller scale over the last year.

“If the regime believed somebody else had carried out this attack then they would have given access to the UN inspectors several days ago, it was last Wednesday night that we and other countries called for that at the United Nations Security Council. They’ve refused that up till now, they have continued to bombard with artillery the areas concerned east of Damascus which, of course, may have destroyed some of the evidence.

“So we have to be realistic now about what the UN team can achieve. They will no doubt work hard at it but the fact is that much of the evidence could have been destroyed by that artillery bombardment, other evidence could have become degraded over the last few days and other evidence could have been tampered with. So we have to recognise that it is evidence some of which could by now have become compromised.

“So in the light of that we’re focused in the British Government on how we respond to what has happened. The Prime Minister has discussed that with President Obama, they are agreed there must be a serious response by the international community. We can not in the twenty first century allow the idea that chemical weapons can be used with impunity, that people can be killed in this way and that there are no consequences for it. And so we believe it’s very important that there is a strong response and that dictators, whether they are Assad or other people who might slaughter their own people or attack the people of any other

country know that the use of chemical weapons is to cross a line and that the world will respond when that line is crossed.

“So we’re focused on that, we’re discussing that with the United States and, of course, with many other countries around the world and we will keep everyone up to date with where we get to.”

Commenting on options for responses by the international community, he said:

“Well I don’t want to go in to those options now for obvious reasons, we are discussing them with the United States and with other countries. It’s very important to act in accordance with international law and, of course, to have widespread international support for making sure that chemical weapons can’t be used with impunity. But we will be deliberating about the options over the coming hours, we will have further meetings within the Government tomorrow and we’re in close consultation really every hour through today with our allies and partners so further detail on that will emerge in due course.”

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