“The use of chemical weapons is a blatant and brutal violation of international law”

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Interview with Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on the situation in Syria following the poison gas attack and the US air strike. Published in Bild am Sonntag on 9 April 2017.

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Minister, how and when did you learn of the US air strike?

I was informed via satellite telephone during a night flight to Mali.

Has Trump’s attack increased the chances of ending the war or has the US attack worsened the situation?

The use of poison gas is a serious war crime and an act of true barbarity. I very much hope that the international pressure will prevent the Syrian regime from violating international law in such a cruel way again and from using poison gas against innocent men, women and children. It’s now of vital importance that we overcome the divide in the

UN

Security Council and that the peace efforts are advanced under the auspices of the United Nations. For if this terrible conflict has shown anything it’s that only a political solution supported by Russia, the US and key regional powers can bring an end to people’s suffering.

Could a world war now break out between the US and Russia?

No. I even assume that the US informed Russia of its impending military action in an appropriate manner. But one thing’s certainly true: seldom since the end of the Cold War has the international situation been as critical as it is now. All sides must now keep calm. What we don’t need is further escalation. That’s why it is so important we now finally undertake joint peace efforts under the auspices of the United Nations.

You've said that the air strikes were understandable. However, they have no foundation under international law nor were they authorised by the United Nations.

The use of chemical weapons is a blatant and brutal violation of international law. Chemical weapons are among the most abhorrent weapons known to humankind. That's why their use is banned under international law. Assad's thugs are unscrupulous repeat offenders. I certainly still remember the images of the murderous poison gas attacks in 2013. That's why I said it was understandable that the United States has now responded with an attack on the military structures of the Assad regime from where this horrific war crime originated. I stand by that.

Why are you so certain that Assad was responsible for last week's poison gas attack? Did the US present proof to its allies?

We've all seen the shocking images of the chemical weapons attack on people in Khan Sheikhoun. Furthermore, the information we've received from our partners and from local contacts makes it seem very plausible that the Assad regime is behind this terrible poison gas attack. It's important that the United Nations and the experts of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (

OPCW

) are now granted immediate access and that they can carry out their investigations unhindered.

Should we provide the US with military or logistical support in any further operations?

The Bundestag mandate is clear: we're using our military capabilities to support the fight against the IS terrorist militia, but not a war against Syria.

Can the German Government put pressure on Russia's President Putin to drop his support for his partner Assad? Did you contact Russia after the air strike or are you planning talks with Russia?

I'm in close contact with my Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. There will be no solution to the Syria conflict without Moscow. And I don't get the impression that Russia will protect Assad for ever. That makes it all the more important that we now make progress in the

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talks.

What should happen to Assad?

We’re dealing here with a murderous regime responsible for unspeakable crimes, hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of refugees. The Assad regime has caused a level of suffering for so many people that is almost unparalleled in today’s world. I’m certain that Assad will be brought to justice for these crimes, be it in the long or short term. At any rate, Assad’s future is already behind him.

Interview conducted by Roman Eichinger und Angelika Hellemann

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