Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"Eastern Aleppo and other besieged areas are today facing new depths of crisis"

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Thank you Mr. President.

What will it take? Syria is in the midst of a horrific conflict and the worst is probably yet to come. The United Kingdom and France have called this emergency session because Eastern Aleppo and other besieged areas are today facing new depths of crisis, as the three briefers have so clearly described.

History may show that it is perhaps the most horrific conflict of our lifetimes. We have faced horror before. We and those that have sat in these very chairs before us have collectively passed over two thousand three hundred and twenty one resolutions. That's two thousand three hundred and twenty one decrees from the world's highest authority on international peace and security. We have sent peacekeepers to war zones. We have stemmed conflict. We have defied great odds, bridged divides, and we have answered the call of humanity for seven consecutive decades.

And yet on Syria, sitting here in this Chamber today, after over five years of fighting, after the deaths of close to half a million people, after the displacement of 11 million people from their homes, with a million more under siege, this Council has completely failed to act.

Stephen O'Brien asks why. The answer is simple. Russia has vetoed time and again to prevent the Security Council from finding the unity necessary to end this war. And so I ask again Mr President, what will it take?

I have met members of Syrian civil society. I have met impartial aid groups, the ICRC, Medicines sans Frontiers. I have met doctors who have treated the wounded in makeshift hospitals in Aleppo. And they tell me what you would expect; the bombs are directly responsible for the greatest number of deaths. To stop the deaths, stop the bombing.

But those numbers are simply the deaths that we can count today. As difficult as it is to imagine, there is even more horror looming under the surface; horror that could be on an even larger scale. An agonizing, slow, and painful death.

That is what the UN are talking about when they brief us on the status of besieged areas in Syria.

Sieges are now a routine item of discussion when this Council discusses Syria. We cannot begin to think that sieges are common, that they are somehow a simple matter of fact. They may be a regular part of the conflict in Syria, but they are anything but regular. What they are is a deliberate act of starvation and a deliberate withholding of medical care.

The Syrian regime and Russia have been executing a plan that has now laid one million people under siege. And executing is an all too appropriate word. Because without a change in policy, without a change of heart, that's exactly what this is - the slow, painful, bitter execution of a million Syrians, cut off from aid convoys, cut off from the world.

The UN has an aid plan. It's not an opposition plan. It's not designed to aid one side over the other. Its sole purpose is to save lives and alleviate suffering. As Stephen said, the aid convoys are ready to roll, but they must have permissions from the regime, permissions that have been systematically denied.

This is the United Nations. The impartial body the world looks to in the bleakest of situations. Russia is a leading member of the United Nations and crucial to the eventual solution of the Syria conflict. So why can Russia and the Syria regime not sign up to the UN's aid plan?

First they said it was because of terrorism. Then we reminded them that 100,000 children could not be terrorists. Then they said it was because of the opposition. Well, the opposition have now agreed to the UN plan for eastern Aleppo. So now, what's the excuse today?

What's the excuse for employing the medieval tactic of siege? What's the excuse for the continued bombardment? For dropping bombs at a disturbing rate over the homes of children and families? What's the excuse for the continued endorsement of war crimes?

The ancient city of Aleppo, as we know it, is on the verge of being wiped from the face of the earth. Today, we speak of reaching those who remain. Tomorrow, there may not be an Aleppo to reach. If that comes to pass, the excuses of the Syrian regime and of Russia will have played a substantial role.

Let me be absolutely clear what needs to happen in Aleppo.

One, there needs to be an immediate ceasefire to give civilians respite from the bombs and to allow humanitarian access.

Two, Russia and the regime must agree – as the armed opposition groups have done – to cooperate with the UN's four-point humanitarian plan.

And three, those civilians who want to leave the city must be allowed to do so safely, to areas of their choosing, with protection assured by impartial monitoring.

We are receiving reports today of the Syrian regime bombing Syrian families who are fleeing Aleppo on foot with their belongings. I call on Russia and the regime to commit to this Council today that no civilians will be attacked as they leave Aleppo. The deliberate targeting of civilians in these circumstances would be a war crime and we will hold those responsible to account.

Mr President,

Words cannot describe what is currently happening in Aleppo. We have heard talk of a “circle of hell”, a “kill zone”, a “giant graveyard”. Within that kill zone, that circle of hell, are one hundred thousand children.

We’ve all been discussing this long enough. You’ve seen the headlines, the images, the videos. Think back to the last face of a Syrian civilian you saw. The gruesome fact is that too many of them are destined to become a statistic. Maybe they already are. Another number in the death toll. Another figure on a UN sitrep of people starving in Aleppo. Another statistic in a headline that reads “7 children dead in school bombing.”

We have made a habit of allowing those statistics to be created and we must break that habit. Egypt, New Zealand and Spain have drafted a very reasonable resolution, calling for a ten day ceasefire to stop the bombing and let aid in. There should be a vote on that resolution as soon as possible. If not today, then I call for the Council to meet again before the end of this week to review the situation in Aleppo, and for us to move swiftly to adopt that resolution to deliver a ceasefire and full implementation of the UN’s humanitarian plan.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eastern-aleppo-and-other-besieged-areas-are-today-facing-new-depths-of-crisis