The world has stood by and watched the killing for too long: How we could prevent the violence from escalating

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Foreign Minister Gabriel on the situation in Syria. Published in the Tagesspiegel newspaper on 9 April 2017.

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There are images which remain etched in our minds. Images which are so terrible that we cannot sleep at night. For me, one such image is that of the father from Khan Sheikhoun taking his two small children to be buried last week. As far as we know, they were killed by a particularly vile weapon, poison gas. The Syrian conflict is marked by daily atrocities: people are being starved, tortured and killed. And yet, the use of chemical weapons is regarded by the international community as especially abhorrent. Almost the entire international community – including Syria – therefore agreed to ban chemical weapons.

Despite these terrible images, which I also found very distressing as a father, the German Government must of course look at the facts dispassionately to ascertain who is responsible. All the evidence available to our partners suggests that the Syrian regime was behind the attack. When Assad deployed chemical weapons against his own people in 2013, the international community came together to force the Syrian Government to accede to the international convention on banning chemical weapons, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and to destroy its existing weapons. In the years that followed, however, the regime time and again deployed chemical agents, e.g. chlorine gas. This has been documented by the United Nations. Now all the evidence indicates that the regime has once again used chemical weapons. This must not remain without consequences. Otherwise, it is an open invitation to other dictators to act with similar brutality. This is another reason why Germany is providing the United Nations with financial support to document war crimes, which must ultimately be dealt with by an international tribunal.

Since the US attack on the Syrian army base where last week’s horrendous poison gas attack originated, people ask me every day: “Could the Third World War break out now? And will the US and Russia now wage war against each other?” That shows that many people are

very unsettled and that they are worried by the prospect of a war between the two superpowers.

I am certain that such an escalation in hostilities will not materialise. However, people are right: it is a long time since the international situation was last so alarming. The

UN

Security Council has been degraded by some of its members, who are blocking a solution and thus ensuring less rather than more security. At the same time, there is talk of an arms build-up around the world and, in contrast to the situation in the 1970s or 1980s, there is no strong framework for negotiations on disarmament alongside the build-up in defence capabilities. On the contrary, the terms arms control and disarmament are not even being mentioned in the current political debate. If Europe has a task here, then as well as developing its own defence capabilities, it must be to finally put proposals on disarmament and arms control back on the international agenda. With 500 million citizens, we Europeans cannot stand on the sidelines and watch international politics unfold. Rather we have to become a confident player on the international stage.

There are many reasons for this. For too long, the world has stood back and watched the civil war and the killing. And the US announcement that it wanted to concentrate on the fight against terrorism and, ultimately, to tolerate the Assad regime, seemed to be an invitation to the Syrian dictator to feel secure. For too long, Syria has been a battleground for proxy wars. For too long, there has been changing support for terrorists because they seem to be suitable instruments for enforcing national interests in the region. The way forward is therefore clear: an escalation of violence will not help the ravaged country and its people. The only way to find a solution is for everyone involved to show their willingness to get together around the table, to ensure a ceasefire and, at the same time, to lay the groundwork for gradual reconciliation among the different sides in the civil war and the construction of a new Syria without Assad and his thugs. For only a democratic and free Syria will be a peaceful Syria.

The attack on one of the regime’s military airfields sent a message, but it does not provide a durable solution to the problems in Syria. Everyone involved knows that. The regime and the opposition are continuing their brutal conflict. Will the shocking bombardment in Khan Sheikhoun make the parties rethink? After all the years of war it is difficult to be hopeful. For that very reason, it is so important that we now finally engage in earnest peace efforts under the auspices of the United Nations. For this terrible conflict shows that only a political solution supported by Russia, the US and the regional powers mixed up in the conflict can end people’s suffering on a durable basis. That is why we wholeheartedly support the efforts of the United Nations. The joint appeal by Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande to Russia to now do everything in its power to facilitate a political solution sent an important initial

message which could lend this process new momentum. Tomorrow I will discuss what else can be done with the Foreign Ministers of the G7 states in Italy.

No-one has a greater interest in this political process than the country and its neighbours, which include Europe. Recognising the primacy of politics, we Europeans are offering negotiations, humanitarian assistance and long-term reconstruction. Military actions, such as those against the terrorists of the so-called Islamic State, which we Europeans support and in which we participate, on the other hand, must remain a last resort. Anyone now talking about stepping up military action against the Assad regime will not resolve the conflict in Syria but, rather, risks triggering a conflict which could then spread far beyond the region. It could lead to more killing, more refugees and no end to the violence. Therefore, this cannot be an option: neither for Europe, nor for

NATO

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Germany feels connected to Syria in many different ways. Many Syrians have called Germany their home for many decades and in the last few years many more fleeing violence and suffering have come to live here. We Germans in particular know what dictatorship, fanaticism and hate can do to people’s hearts. However, we also know that it is possible to overcome such divides. We want Syria to again become a cultural, political and economic hub in the Middle East where all Syrians can live together in peace and where they need not fear terrorism or political repression.

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