Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

We must not lose sight of desperate situation in Syria

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Thank you, Mr President.

I welcome your Foreign Minister’s attendance in the Security Council today. And I would also like to thank the Secretary-General for his statement and the representatives of Palestine and Israel for their contributions to this debate.

As we enter 2014, we are at a moment of opportunity for the Middle East Peace Process. Entering back into direct negotiations last year was a bold step forward. It was a welcome move toward peace in a troubled area. It is the responsibility of all of us here to support the parties, led by the United States, to capitalise on this opportunity.

My government continues to put its full support behind Secretary Kerry and his team, and we urge the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships to continue their admirable focus and commitment.

This year started on a positive note with the implementation of Israel’s brave decision to release the third tranche of Palestinian prisoners. The United Kingdom firmly believes that such steps, despite their difficulty, are important to achieving a lasting peace and security.

However, we are very concerned by Israel’s decision to announce further settlement building in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. My government condemns these announcements and considers such actions as a serious a threat to peace. We urge Israel to avoid any further illegal settlement activity and to reverse the advancement of plans.

The United Kingdom has also been clear that for this process to be a success, people on the ground - both Israelis and Palestinians - need to see the real and tangible benefits of peace. We remain deeply concerned about the 663 Palestinian-owned homes and livelihood structures demolished in Area C and East Jerusalem in 2013. Demolitions and evictions are harmful to the peace process; and, in all but the most limited circumstances, are contrary to international humanitarian law. Reports of “price-tag” attacks, including on a mosque in Deir Istiya village on 15 January, are also of serious concern. We condemn such acts and urge the Israeli authorities to bring those responsible to justice.

We are also concerned about rocket fire from the Gaza strip into Israel and in particular condemn the rockets fired at Ashkelon on 16 January in violation of international law. All

parties must respect the November 2012 ceasefire agreement in full. The people of Gaza and Israel will only lose from further violence.

There will be difficult decisions in the months ahead, but we urge all those involved to keep their shared goal in mind - a negotiated two state solution leading to a sovereign, viable and contiguous Palestinian state living in peace and security alongside a safe and secure Israel. The United Kingdom stands ready to do its part. That is why we strongly back the European Union's readiness to offer an unprecedented package of political, economic and security support to both parties in the event that a final status deal is reached.

Mr President, on Syria,

The United Nations Secretary-General has made clear that the aim of this week's Geneva Conference on Syria is to "assist the Syrian parties in ending the violence and achieving a comprehensive agreement for a political settlement, implementing fully the Geneva Communiqué, while preserving the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria". As the permanent members of this Council agreed on 30 June 2012, and was endorsed by the whole Council in Resolution 2118 last September, this means agreeing a transitional governing body in Syria with full executive powers, formed by mutual consent, to meet the aspirations of the Syrian people.

Yesterday, the Secretary-General announced that he was extending an invitation to Iran to attend the opening of the conference at Montreux on the basis that they acknowledge that the conference's purpose is the full implementation of the original Geneva Communiqué. If they are to attend, it is now vital that the Iranian government confirm publicly and clearly that they share this understanding.

We have also urged the United Nations, as mandated by the Security Council in many resolutions, including resolution 2122 of October 2013, to ensure a full role for women in the Syrian peace negotiations.

It is important to remember these negotiations will be a process – not a single event . We should not underestimate the formidable challenges ahead and we must not lose sight of the desperate situation Syrian civilians are facing on a daily basis.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights now puts the death toll at over 125,000 people. In Aleppo and across all of Syria, we have seen the regime continue to attack its own civilian population with barrel bombs. This indiscriminate bombardment is yet another war crime on the part of the regime and Assad and those around him should be in no doubt that the world will hold them to account. The situation in Syria should be referred to the International Criminal Court.

Mr President,

The humanitarian crisis has reached catastrophic proportions. 11 million Syrians are in desperate need of urgent assistance, particularly in besieged and hard to reach areas. This is an unparalleled crisis and the world needs to respond accordingly. We welcome the $2.4 billion in pledges made at the Kuwait Pledging Conference last week. My government announced a further pledge of $163 million in humanitarian assistance, bringing our total contribution to nearly $1 billion - the largest sum that the United Kingdom has ever committed to a single crisis. This funding is going towards meeting the basic lifesaving needs of Syrians affected by the conflict, both inside Syria and in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq.

We pay tribute to those neighbouring countries, including Jordan, for the burden that they are carrying to help alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people.

But increased funding can only make a difference if there is progress on access and protection for humanitarian actors in Syria - where 21 UN staff members remain in Government detention and 47 humanitarian workers have now been killed. Progress on implementing this Council’s Presidential Statement of 2nd of October remains extremely limited. It is unacceptable that humanitarian organisations are being deliberately obstructed by the regime from delivering aid. The regime has shown it can facilitate access for chemical weapons inspectors - it needs to show the same commitment to ensuring aid reaches those most in need.

Thank you, Mr President.

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