Human Rights Commissioner: We need a UN resolution against Syria (interview)

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Interview with Markus Löning, Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Aid.

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While the outcome of the civil war in Libya seems more or less decided, the situation in Syria remains uncertain: since the start of the protests in March, President Assad’s regime has been cracking down hard on demonstrators.

That’s what doctors and human rights groups in Syria are saying.

The United Nations estimates that more than 2200 people have been killed so far.

Only yesterday, the army shot and killed another 16 demonstrators.

The

UN

wants to take action now: the Human Rights Council condemned Syria for using violence against its own population.

An international commission is to investigate the incidents.

On the line now I have Markus Löning, the Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights.

Good morning, Mr Löning!

Good morning!

The

UN

Human Rights Council wants to launch an investigation into the violence against peaceful demonstrators.

How can that be done when Damascus is not even allowing foreign reporters into the country?

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representatives have already been in the country and seen the situation at first hand. These were representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who were there in response to calls from the Human Rights Council. What they investigated and found out there was profoundly shocking: in some cases, people have been taken from hospitals to be killed, or even killed within hospitals. What's happened to people suspected of being or having been against the regime is simply appalling. So it has been possible in the past to send people into the country and we hope it'll be possible again in future. For what was discovered played a big part in convincing people that we now need a resolution against Syria.

Russia and China don't seem to be convinced, at least when it comes to sanctions.

Both countries have announced that they won't support them.

Is there any chance that sanctions will be adopted, or is there deadlock in the Human Rights Council once more?

What was remarkable in the Human Rights Council was – and this has been evident in other contexts during the last few weeks – that the Arab countries took a clear stand and said: the violence must be stopped. Some of their ambassadors were withdrawn and clear words were spoken. That's a major step forward. Now, of course, we have to appeal to Russia and China. For we need a Security Council resolution which contains sanctions against Syria supported by the entire international community and which are subsequently applied worldwide. Russia and China really should be aware of the situation.

And how do you intend to convince them?

I believe that President Medvedev has already strongly condemned what is happening on the ground in Syria. In doing so, he has to some degree corrected Russia's position. We're continuing to work on this. We're working on it with our partners, with our friends, and I can only appeal once more to the Russians and Chinese to reconsider their position: Assad must stop shooting his own people. No-one can fail to support this standpoint and the onus is on the Russians and Chinese to support this stand.

The sanctions include, for example, freezing the assets of the Assad regime, something we've already witnessed in the case of Libya, and individuals are to be banned from leaving the country or from entering other countries, for instance

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states. Do you believe that this will have an impact on Bashar al-Assad?

We've already adopted such sanctions within the

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. They're already in force between the

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and Syria. Individuals have been banned from entering the

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, we've frozen assets and we've stopped development aid. Now we're working on a round of sanctions which are to include economic sanctions, in particular a ban on buying Syrian oil. Obviously, none of these sanctions will force the regime to stop tomorrow, but they will increase the pressure on the regime. We feel rather powerless, we have to admit that, but we are gradually stepping up the pressure. The next goal is to cut Syria off from money, from financial resources. And, of course, this won't have a real impact unless the

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Security Council adopts the appropriate measures.

Mr Löning, you've just said that the

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would also like Syrian oil exports to be stopped, that's to say it wants to impose an oil embargo, but there doesn't seem to be a consensus on this within the

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We're working on this at the moment. We're discussing it with our

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partners. We hope we can implement this in the coming week. It's difficult work, for we have to resolve complicated legal issues, difficult political issues. But we're working hard to resolve them, for Assad has to be put under as much pressure as possible. And there's consensus on that within the

EU

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Members of the Syrian opposition have established a national council in exile, which is to coordinate the anti-government protests in Damascus.

Will the German Government seek to establish contact with the national council, or even support it?

Naturally, we're talking to all kinds of people who are engaged in the struggle against Assad. We have established contacts in Syria but we have to be extremely careful at the moment. Only this week, I met Syrians who are living in exile. So we're speaking to a wide range of people.

Let's turn to Libya. Gaddafi's fall seems to be imminent – it's only a matter of time – and yesterday the

UN

decided that more than one billion dollars from Gaddafi's assets frozen abroad should be made available to the rebels.

Prior to that, the German Government released 100 million euro.

The reasoning behind this is that a humanitarian disaster is to be averted.

However, at the moment there isn't even a functioning government in Tripoli: to whom are we actually handing over these sums?

There's the National Transitional Council, and it would be unrealistic to expect a functioning government or administration to be in place in the current situation. What we're doing at the moment .... what we're preparing at the moment is ensuring that the money can be unfrozen as quickly as possible. As soon as the National Transitional Council has control, we'll endeavour – and this is the task of the Security Council – to release the financial assets so that there isn't a humanitarian disaster, so that the money is available as quickly as possible for reconstruction and for supplying people with essentials.

That means that, contrary to what has been reported in the media, Germany hasn't released the sum of one million euro yet?

Yes we have. This is a loan for which money frozen here will be used as security. This money has already been released but there are more Libyan assets frozen in Germany and in other countries. And, of course, they will have to be released as soon as the transition has taken place.

You’ve just mentioned the structures which are not yet in place.

Isn’t it somewhat reckless to offer this 100 million euro loan at this early stage?

We are cooperating with the National Transitional Council, as are other countries. At this point in time, it’s the legitimate representative body of the Libyan people, that’s how we have to look at it, for we can’t expect a legitimate democratic government or something similar to be in place during a civil war. Rather, we have work with those who are shouldering responsibility, who are taking on responsibility for what is happening in the country. And we simply want to support the Libyan people, which is in the process of liberating itself from a dictator.

That was Markus Löning, the Federal Government Human Rights Commissioner, talking about the situation in Libya and Syria.

Mr Löning

, thank you for talking to us.

Thank you.

The interview was conducted by André Hatting.

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