Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary statement on Gaza, the Middle East Peace Process and Syria

2012-11-20

Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a statement on Gaza, the Middle East Peace Process and Syria.

The whole House will be united in concern both at the intolerable situation for the residents of southern Israel, and the grave loss of life and humanitarian suffering in Gaza including the particular impact on children.

On 14th November the Israeli Defence Forces began air strikes against the Gaza Strip in response to a sharp increase in rocket fire. Hamas and other militant groups responded with even greater rocket fire, although these attacks have been reduced in the last two days. As of today three Israeli citizens have been killed including one woman and one child, and at least one hundred and nine Palestinians, including eleven women and twenty six children also killed.

We have made clear both that Hamas bears principal responsibility for the start of the current crisis, but also that all sides have responsibilities. We quickly called on Israel to seek every opportunity to de-escalate their military response, and to observe international humanitarian law and avoid civilian casualties. At the meeting I attended in Brussels yesterday EU Foreign Ministers condemned the rocket attacks on Israel and called for an urgent de-escalation and cessation of hostilities.

We have also warned that a ground invasion of Gaza could lengthen the conflict, sharply increase civilian casualties, and erode international support for Israel’s position.

We wish to see an agreed ceasefire that stops the rocket attacks against Israel and ends Israeli military operations. Efforts to agree a ceasefire are continuing as I speak and the UN Security Council will continue discussions on the situation today. More open access in and out of Gaza is part of any longer term solution. We pay tribute to the efforts of the Egyptian government and the UN Secretary General to secure an agreed ceasefire, and have supported these efforts over the last few days. I discussed these with my European colleagues yesterday, and with the Egyptian, Israeli and Turkish Foreign Ministers over the weekend, as my Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister did with Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Morsi. My Hon Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire the Under Secretary

of State is in Ramallah today where he will meet President Abbas after visiting southern Israel yesterday.

There is no military solution to the crisis in Gaza or to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Peace becomes harder to achieve with each military confrontation, each loss of life, and the creation of facts on the ground.

The only way to give the Palestinian people the state that they need and deserve and the Israeli people the security and peace they are entitled to, is through a negotiated two-state solution, and time for this is now running out.

This requires Israelis and Palestinians to return to negotiations, Israel to stop illegal settlement building, Palestinian factions to reconcile with each other and the international community led by the United States and supported by European nations to make a huge effort to push the peace process forward urgently.

While there is any chance of achieving a return to talks in the coming months, we continue to advise President Abbas against attempts to win Palestinian observer state status at the United Nations through a vote in the UN General Assembly. We judge that this would make it harder to secure a return to negotiations, and could have very serious consequences for the Palestinian authority.

Our collective goal must be a two state solution based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the capital of both states, and a just settlement for refugees. So while we support Palestinian aspirations and understand the pressures on President Abbas, we urge him to lead the Palestinians into negotiations and not to risk paralysing the process. But we also urge Israel equally to make every effort to restart negotiations, before the window for a two-state solution closes altogether.

The urgency of all this is underlined by the conflict in Syria. The whole House will join me in condemning the barbaric violence by the Assad regime, which continues its aerial warfare against Aleppo, Homs and Damascus itself.

30,000 people have died already, and more than 100 are still being killed each day. Countless homes, clinics, hospitals and essential infrastructure such as water and sanitation systems have been destroyed or severely damaged and between 1 and 3 million people are displaced from their homes.

There are appalling reports of rape and sexual violence by government forces and militia and as a form of torture in regime detention centres, which the UN Human Rights Council-mandated Commission of Inquiry has said could be prosecuted as crimes against humanity.

And there are now well over 400,000 refugees in neighbouring countries. The impact on young Syrians is particularly acute, since 50% of all Syrian internally displaced people and refugees are children.

We are increasing our humanitarian assistance as the crisis grows and winter approaches, and our appeals to other members of the international community to give far more relief to UN relief efforts.

Our £53.5 million in humanitarian assistance so far includes £9.7 million for the World Food Programme to feed 80,000 people inside Syria each month; £4 million to the UN Refugee Agency to provide shelter and other basic relief items; and £9.7 million to other relief agencies for medical services and supplies, food parcels, water and sanitation services, distribution of blankets and hygiene kits. In neighbouring countries, we have given £10 million for UN Refugee agency to provide shelter, protection, registration and water and sanitation services to refugees; £5 million to the World Food Programme to feed 20,000 refugees; and £6 million to UNICEF to provide education and trauma support for children, and water and sanitation services. In Cairo last week I called on other countries to increase their contribution to the relief effort, which the UN has described as “critically under-funded”.

However what is urgently needed is a political transition to new and legitimate leadership that reflects the will of the Syrian people, and that can end the violence and begin to rebuild the country with regional and international support.

On 11th November there was a major breakthrough in Doha, with the establishment of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which has been welcomed by many Syrians.

Last Friday I met the President and two of the Vice-Presidents of the National Coalition on their first visit to Europe.

I sought assurances from them in three areas:

First, I urged them to commit themselves to developing their political structures, widening their support among all sections of Syrian society, and agreeing a detailed political transition plan for Syria.

Second, I encouraged them to use the next Friends of Syria meeting, which we hope will be held in Morocco next month, to set out a plan for Syria’s future in detail.

And third, I urged them to show a clear commitment to human rights and international humanitarian law, including the protection of all religious communities and unfettered and safe access for humanitarian agencies.

In response, they stressed their determination to build on the Doha agreement and to leave the door open to other opposition groups to join them. They spoke of their intention to win the trust of Syrians from all communities, to be a moderate political force committed to democracy, and not to repeat the abuses of the Assad regime. They told me that their priority was protecting the civilian population against attack, and focussing on achieving a political transition. It would be for the people of Syria, they told me, to approve a future government.

These are important and encouraging statements by the National Coalition. They have much to do to win the full support of the Syrian people and coordinate opposition efforts more effectively. But it is strongly in the interests of Syria, of the wider region, and of the United Kingdom that we support them and deny space to extremist groups.

On the basis of the assurances I received and my consultations with European partners yesterday, Her Majesty's Government has decided to recognise the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

As the President of the National Coalition said to me on Friday, recognition imposes responsibilities on the Coalition, and we will continue to press them to uphold their commitments.

I can also announce a significant increase in practical support for the Syrian Opposition by the United Kingdom.

First, we will invite the Coalition to appoint a political representative to the UK, and we will offer support to them as they set up their political and humanitarian structures.

Second, we will provide a £1 million package of communications support, which could for instance include mobile internet hubs and satellite phones to improve the Coalition's ability to communicate inside Syria.

Third, we will urgently deploy a Stabilisation Response Team to the region to work with the Coalition to develop its plan to meet people's basic needs in opposition held areas and this team will draw up recommendations for areas for further UK assistance.

Fourth and separately, My Right Honourable Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is looking at increasing our assistance to Syrians affected by the conflict. This could include increasing our humanitarian medical assistance for wounded Syrian civilians by providing UK funding for hospitals and mobile clinics, and training for health workers. And we intend to launch new work to build on our existing work to support victims of sexual violence in Syria.

This new package of UK support amounts to around £2 million of immediate commitments, and we will look to expand this considerably in the coming months.

This comes on top of the training of citizen journalists, human rights advocates, doctors and Syrian activists that we have already provided, and the generators, communications equipment and water purification kits for unarmed opposition groups and civil society that I announced during the summer.

Alongside that increased political and practical support, we are pressing the EU to increase its support to civil society in Syria.

We will continue to increase the pressure on Assad and those who support him through EU sanctions, including seeking accountability through the UN's Commission of Inquiry.

We also expect there to be discussions in NATO in the coming days about supporting the security of Turkey, and we will continue to work with all of Syria's neighbours to help them mitigate the effects of the crisis.

And we will step up our support for political transition and our planning for the day after Assad.

Finally, we will continue to support the work of the UN and Arab League Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, who I met a few days ago in Cairo, and renew our efforts to persuade Russia and China to work with us at the United Nations Security Council. I will take every opportunity to urge my Russian and Chinese colleagues to support a political and diplomatic solution to the conflict in Syria. Without such a solution, everything that they and we most fear is coming closer, including ever greater loss of life, instability in neighbouring countries and an opportunity for extremists to pursue their own ends.

The basis for such a political settlement is clear. A credible alternative to the Assad regime is emerging that has the growing support of the Arab League, the European Union, the United States and an increasing number of other countries; and we have an agreed basis for a transition in the form of the Geneva Communique which all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council signed up to in June.

But the absence of that political and diplomatic solution, we will not rule out any option in accordance with international law that might save innocent lives in Syria and prevent the destabilisation of a region that remains critical to the security of the United Kingdom and the peace of the whole world.

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