Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

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Thank you Mr President for convening this open debate. I welcome Nikolay Mladenov's presence and compelling briefing.

The timing of this open debate, one year on from the conflict in Gaza, is sadly fitting. Today is an important moment to remember all those who lost their lives, to recommit ourselves to do all we can to prevent further violence, and to extend that commitment beyond Gaza to Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East region.

Mr President,

As we heard in the moving arria formula meeting earlier this week, the painful consequences of the fighting in Gaza continue to this day. It's increasingly clear that urgent action is now needed to preserve the two-state solution and to alleviate the impact of the occupation. The British Foreign Secretary saw this firsthand during his recent visit.

Improving conditions in Gaza and the West Bank is a vital first step. The recent plans by Israel to construct over 900 new settlement housing units in the West Bank is clearly contrary to the goal of peace, and so are plans to evict Palestinians from the village of Susya. We are pleased that Israel has taken some steps to ease restrictions in Gaza. But increasing exports and doubling the water supply is not enough. The humanitarian situation remains unacceptable. More than 100,000 people are still displaced, power outages last for up to 12 hours a day and 120,000 people are still without a water supply.

So we need to see rapid progress to improve living conditions, improve quality of life and improve the economic outlook in Gaza. Movement of people between Gaza or the West Bank and Israel should be eased. Exports from Gaza should be allowed to increase to 2007 levels. The water supply should be doubled again. And restrictions on fishing, electricity and waste water treatment need to be eased.

Action is needed from both sides. We call on the Palestinian Authority, led by President Abbas, to take concrete steps to return to Gaza. We urge him to advance reconciliation, and demonstrate clearly that he is the leader of all Palestinian people.

And the international community has a vital role to play too. We all need to urge donors to fulfil their financial pledges to aid reconstruction efforts in Gaza without delay. Of all the international pledges made at Cairo, only 27% have so far been met. The United Kingdom is playing its part. We support UNRWA in its vital work and support Nikolay Mladenov's call for donors to step up. We have been one of the largest donors to Gaza since last summer. We have provided more than $26 million in emergency assistance and pledged an additional $31 million at the Reconstruction Conference in Cairo.

So together, we need to work harder than ever to create the conditions on the ground to foster a return to meaningful negotiations. In doing so, we can bring real improvements to those on both sides who have suffered for far too long. This Council must be ready to play our part when those conditions have been created.

Mr President,

This approach is also desperately needed in Syria. For too long we've been briefed on the indiscriminate use of barrel bombs by the Assad regime. The recent OCHA briefing set out clearly that attacks on hospitals are still common place. This is barbaric and unacceptable.

For too long we've heard distressing reports of the use of chemical weapons. The Council will soon have the chance to send a clear message to Assad on this issue. And I hope all members will support the draft resolution on the joint investigative mechanism when it comes to the Council.

It is clearer than ever that there can be no military victory in Syria. Only a political solution can end the bloodshed. I look forward to the briefing by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura next week. It is vital that we redouble our support for his efforts to bring about an inclusive political transition; one that operationalises the Geneva Communiqué. A government that acts on behalf of all Syrians, one strong enough to defeat the threat of extremism, is long overdue.

The consequences of not dealing with the crisis in Syria can be seen in the camps across neighbouring countries. Millions of Syrians are now reliant on the generosity of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the international community.

Lebanon has accepted nearly 1.2 million Syrian refugees; an increase of nearly a quarter of its population. We need to recognise – and help alleviate - the pressure this has created. The United Kingdom has provided $296 million to support Lebanon. We are making a real difference by providing food, shelter, and medical aid to the most vulnerable in refugee and host communities.

But we are concerned that the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan remains desperately underfunded. We need to work, all of us, with donors, particularly in the Gulf, to help meet the basic needs of host communities and refugees. And it is crucial that the Lebanese

Government elects a President without any further delay so that it can meet the needs of all Lebanese people.

Mr President,

Let me close as I began, by focusing on the timeliness of this debate. On Monday, this Council unanimously agreed a resolution on Iran’s nuclear programme, bringing to an end over a decade of negotiations. It is good for the region and good for the international community. We hope and expect that this agreement will herald a new era of positive Iranian engagement in the region.

In reaching this agreement, the five permanent members of the Council, together with our German and European Union colleagues, showed a unity of purpose that is sometimes sadly lacking on other Council business on the Middle East.

And it is this spirit of co-operation and determination that we will need to harness for our work on the Middle East Peace Process and on Syria. We have seen the consequences of our failure to do so for too long.

Thank you Mr President.

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