Statement by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the first reading of the German Government’s motion to extend Germany’s involvement in supporting NATO integrated air defence in Turkey (Operation Active Fence)

2014-01-16

-- Translation of advance text --

Mr President,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Members of this House,

The people of Syria have been suffering fighting and bloodshed for three years now. That’s three years in which more than 100,000 of them have lost their lives – three years in which millions have been forced to flee their homes.

More than two million Syrians have sought refuge in neighbouring countries so far, and many times that number are still trying to escape violence and persecution within the country itself. Syria’s neighbours have a lot to cope with in the face of the growing floods of refugees, especially Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

We are witnessing one of the greatest humanitarian disasters of recent years, if not decades – a disaster which took on an added dimension of horror when chemical weapons were used against Syria’s civilian population in August last year.

We in Germany are acutely aware of the suffering and the plight of the civilian population, not least in view of those images from Damascus; what is difficult to discern clearly are the dividing lines between the fighters, between the faltering regime and an opposition racked by infighting, between extremist forces and those democratic forces within the opposition which long for peace and liberty.

However, the more blurred those lines become, the clearer it is to me that only a political solution can be the right one. Only when the escalated violence winds down and the desire for democracy and liberty takes root will the suffering of the people come to an end. Germany is doing all it can to see that political solution reached.

For the first time, a door is now opening that could lead to a political path. It started with the initiative to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, which has been a success on two fronts. For one thing, it helped to break the apparently inevitable spiral of military escalation and avoid violent intervention by the United States. Even more significantly, the stand-off in the

UN

Security Council was lifted, and the US and Russia were prevailed upon to engage in initial cooperation on the conflict in Syria.

Admittedly, the door is only open a crack at the moment – but we can see a definite glimmer of hope through the gap. The upcoming negotiations in Montreux are the ideal opportunity to open that door to peace a little further. We Germans share responsibility in that regard.

And we intend to shoulder it, which is why the new German Government did not hesitate long when asked whether we wanted to be involved in destroying Syria's chemical weapons. The success of that operation will show whether the new approach in international policy on Syria is well founded.

That is why we provided the international inspectors with logistical and financial assistance to help them swiftly identify, secure and remove the chemical weapons in Syria. It is also the reason why we are now mobilising our technical expertise to destroy the deadly substances once and for all. I am very glad that this has the support of all political groups in this House.

Shouldering responsibility secondly means providing humanitarian assistance when so many are in need. We have made considerable funding available to that end. And we mustn't slacken our efforts. We will be helping where we can, not only in Syria itself.

Our help will also be going to Syria's neighbours in particular, to ensure that the pressures presented by huge floods of refugees do not generate additional social emergencies and fresh political hotspots there. That responsibility also involves opening our doors to those seeking refuge in Germany. More than 30,000 people have found their way to us, whether as asylum seekers or through the various federal and Länder refugee programmes. That puts us among the top countries in Europe for taking in refugees. And it is right and proper that this should be the case, as this is an important way of helping to mitigate the suffering.

Thirdly, Germany bears responsibility at the negotiating table. In the core group of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People, we are working to see the moderate opposition forces able to take part in the peace conference in Montreux. All forces in Syria which long for peace and liberty ought to contribute to the success of this conference. Along with my fellow Foreign Ministers, I appealed to the Syrian opposition to that effect in Paris last week. A solution will only be found at the negotiating table, not on the battlefield.

Last but not least, we have a responsibility to Turkey, our partner in

NATO

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Turkey is directly affected by the situation in Syria. Three quarters of a million refugees are a massive burden even for a country of Turkey’s size. That is why our humanitarian support for Syrian refugees applies particularly strongly in Turkey.

At the same time, the conflict next door also remains a military threat to the people of Turkey. Turkey is therefore asking its partners in

NATO

to keep Patriot defence systems stationed on the Syrian border. We are asking today for the consent of this House so that we can respond to that request. This deployment is and will remain an exclusively defensive measure. As before, the Patriot missiles cannot be used to set up a no fly zone over Syria.

They remain subject to

NATO

command and control and are covered by the political mandate of the North Atlantic Council. We will continue to have a maximum of 400 soldiers on the ground. The conditions of the deployment are therefore unchanged.

Germany accepts its responsibility, all aspects of that responsibility, in the common struggle for peace in Syria. The door is only open a crack; the Montreux conference is a glimmer of hope. That hope should give us cause to redouble our efforts and do what we can to put an end to the suffering of people in Syria.

Overview "Newsroom"

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