Speech Forein minister Rosenthal at Friends of the Syrian People Sanctions Working Group

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Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Uri Rosenthal opening the meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People Sanctions Working Group, The Hague, 20 September 2012

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to The Hague. The Tunisian and Canadian co-chairs and I are all looking forward to a successful meeting here in The Hague.

Two weeks ago I visited the Kilis refugee camp in Turkey. And there, thousands of Syrian refugees spend their days, thinking of home. They have fled the violence, leaving behind their relatives and homes and their lives have been turned upside down. Let me say to you some remarkable observations: there where mainly women and children there and only very few men; they were in the regions in Syria up north. And back home meanwhile, the fighting is as bad as ever, if not getting worse by the day.

The violence in Syria must stop. No government may treat its people the way the Syrian government is doing. The international community has a responsibility to keep stressing that, over and over again. We have to take all possible measures to discourage the regime and stop its attacks.

I too, ladies and gentlemen, feel the growing public frustration that we are not able to protect the Syrian people. The refugees in Kilis are looking to the international community in despair.

It’s good to see that the Friends of the Syrian People condemn the Syrian regime. At this meeting we will repeat it. We are here today to send this message.

But I don’t need to tell you that sending a message isn’t enough to change the situation in Syria. There have been so many messages up to now. The sooner we find a political solution to the conflict, the better. This is an internal, domestic conflict. But it is also regional in nature, and for that matter it requires a regional approach. Receiving the thousands of refugees places a great burden on Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, for example. Let me say that a lot of attention is going to Turkey and rightly so. I’ve been in Jordan, which also bears a heavy burden, as does Lebanon. The Arab League has a key role in the search for a solution. Because everyone wants to stop the conflict from spreading to the rest of the region. The

regime’s days are numbered; it has lost all legitimacy. Assad has no future in a new Syria and the challenge now is to ensure the most peaceful possible transition to democracy and pluralism.

Yet we need to remember that the situation in Syria is very complex. There is no simple answer to the question of what we can or must do and in any event it’s vital that we proceed with humanitarian aid, with diplomatic efforts to find a political solution and support for the opposition and with economic reconstruction. And we also need to get on with sanctions too, to deepen the regime’s isolation, to squeeze the regime. Sanctions can contribute to the regime’s ultimate collapse.

Deciding to impose sanctions is a good start by itself, but what we also need vigorous implementation. Sanctions will only have an impact if they are carried out effectively and that is how we can make a difference.

Many of us are making sure that the regime’s leaders, top officials and army commanders and intelligence personnel can no longer travel abroad. By freezing the regime’s bank accounts, we are preventing it from receiving money from other countries. Now that it can no longer sell oil, it has lost one of its main sources of income. And of course we are trying to ensure that arms are not getting into Syria. And the same applies to other products the regime can use to hurt its people – everyday products for us, but for them, dual-use. Take the technology and equipment required to censor websites or track people online. To you and me Information and Communication Technology is an innocent tool we use every day. But we need to ensure it can’t be used to commit violence or oppress the Syrian people.

Some of you, ladies and gentlemen, have already imposed extensive sanctions. Others have adopted a more modest package. I would like to encourage all of you to take a good look at the sanctions you are applying. Assess them carefully and decide if more and stronger measures are possible.

Implementing sanctions sounds easier than it is. We don’t always know exactly which products are used to oppress the Syrian people. Or what companies are involved. The regime and its trading partners try to get around sanctions. So we need to work together with public and, not to forget, private partners, by sharing information and best practices.

We will be doing that today, gathered here in The Hague, by talking with experts. People who work with sanctions every day in the financial sector. They are familiar with the difficulties in implementation. They know the holes in the net that the regime can slip through.

And while experts help governments, governments are helping banks and companies. We are advising the private sector on what the sanctions do and do not allow. To further enhance the dialogue with the private sector, we are designating a contact point for each country. So companies know where they can go for answers and, not the least, advice.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every day we are confronted with horrific images on the news. And let me say that we again get many bad messages from Syria. The turmoil in Syria is far from over. The road to a new Syria may still be long. And it’s vital that the international community stays involved. Our common goal is a democratic government that respects all Syrians, whatever their ethnic, religious or political background. I know we can’t guarantee a smooth and fast transition. But we can help push aside obstacles and be explicit about the destination we share: a peaceful, secure future for Syria. So that the Syrian refugees in Kilis and in other refugee camps can return home. That is what we are sitting here together for.

I wish you a productive and effective meeting.

Thank you.

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