Syria: humanitarian crisis, Italian initiatives – Terzi: aid to children freezing in border camps

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Italy renewed its pledge to support the consolidation of the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime, as well as to “seek to alleviate the serious humanitarian crisis” and gave its consent to the “concrete solidarity” initiative with Turkey involving the deployment of Patriot missiles for the “exclusive defence” of the southeastern borders of NATO. “We are extremely concerned over the Syrian crisis and consider entirely unacceptable the suffering inflicted on the civilian population. We are committed to supporting the consolidation of the Syrian opposition”, was Premier Mario Monti’s statement at the end of a meeting with Lebanese Premier Najib Mikati today in Rome.

Risk of a humanitarian catastrophe

“We must get there before this becomes a humanitarian catastrophe”, said Minister Giulio Terzi, announcing that Italy had decided to send €1.5 million in immediate aid for the Syrian refugee border camps in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan where, “there are now 300,000 refugees” and where “children are dying of the cold, as the head of the Syrian opposition has told me”. Terzi pointed out that “a few hours from now” a plane would leave from the Brindisi depot. “”As far as Italy is concerned”, Terzi added, “the humanitarian emergency that has been created by the very serious Syrian conflict, has been a top priority from the start. We have tried to move the international community and have been among those insisting the most in UN and EU refugee aid programmes”. The minister then reported that, from what came out at the dinner for the foreign ministers at the NATO headquarters, other European countries “are making massive moves” to send humanitarian aid, pointing out that German minister Westerwelle was preparing €70 million in aid allotments and that Italy would earmark €20 million “as of the start of next year”.

NATO’s “Concrete solidarity” with Turkey

Minister Giulio Terzi, who participated in a two-day NATO ministerial meeting that put the central focus on the Syrian situation, explained that the deployment of Patriot missiles in Turkey under NATO command would serve “exclusively” as a demonstration of concrete solidarity with Turkey, a NATO member, and “has nothing to do with the establishment of a no-fly zone or is in any way to be construed as preparation for military action against the Syrian regime”.

“Unacceptable”the use of chemical weapons

The end of the Bashar al Assad regime “seems near”, Terzi said. And if Damascus were to decide to use chemical weapons, either out of desperation or as a means for spreading the conflict beyond its borders, Terzi stressed that it would be “absolutely unacceptable”, while according to his French colleague Laurent Fabius, the reaction would be “severe”. In the same vein, Britain’s William Hague spoke of the possible “serious consequences”, and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said: “We know that they have warheads”, and that they have “chemical weapons”. The possible use of nerve gas is a red line not crossable even for Russia. Minister Sergei Lavrov, after the NATO-Russia Council meeting in Brussels, warned that “the use of weapons of mass destruction would have serious implications”, adding that Russia “would not accept any violation of international treaties” if Syria were to use them.

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