Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"We all want to counter terrorism in Syria, but attacks on schools and hospitals are not counter terrorist operations."

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Thank you Stephen and Elizabeth for your powerful briefings.

The United Nations is working tirelessly to help millions of men, women and children in desperate need in Syria. The Syrian regime and Russia, in contrast, seem determined to increase that number, to make their suffering even worse, and to prolong this barbaric conflict.

As Stephen has spelt out, this is most clearly seen in Aleppo. Hundreds of thousands of people are enduring hell, living without the most basic supplies, living – if you can call it that – in fear of barrel bombs, shelling or worse. They have gone months, without receiving a single delivery of aid or a single box of medical supplies.

And yet, thanks to the UN, there are trucks full of supplies ready and waiting to go. Ready and waiting to save lives. The Syrian regime, which Russia chooses to back, is deliberately preventing this food and medicine from reaching those in need.

Russia has the power to allow the aid so desperately needed into the city, if it does not the world will hold it to account for the barbarous result.

I urge the Russian Federation to persuade the Syrian regime to let the UN do its job and get aid into Aleppo.

But the tragedy, Mr President, is that even this won't be enough. Not content with starving thousands of innocent civilians, the Asad regime is pummelling them with sortie after sortie of devastating airstrikes. As we've heard, dozens have been killed and injured in the past few days alone, including through two vile attacks on the same children's hospital.

Elizabeth has confirmed that there are no more functioning hospitals left in Eastern Aleppo. That is the result of deliberate aerial attacks on those hospitals and is part of a systematic campaign to remove even the most basic of services left in the city.

And yet Russia has said, and I quote: "the allegedly bombed 'hospitals' in Aleppo exist only in the imagination".

Please.

We all know what needs to happen. I will repeat it in this Chamber again. And I will keep doing so until I am blue in the face if it means shifting the policy of the Russian Federation.

First, stop the war crimes. Attacks on hospitals, attacks on civilians, attacks on schools, attacks on vital infrastructure. These attacks serve no military purpose. How can you justify the bombing of a school, like the one in Idlib? How can you justify the killing of 20 children and three teachers? As Elbio said, there is no God and no principle that can possibly justify such an attack.

We all want to counter terrorism in Syria, but attacks on schools and hospitals are not counter terrorist operations. So we support Staffan de Mistura's request to send a UN verification team to investigate the attacks on hospitals in Aleppo.

Second, aid needs to get in. We commend the UN on their humanitarian response plan for Aleppo. All parties need to implement it fully and immediately. But this issue goes far beyond Aleppo. As Stephen said, the UN now puts the number of those living in besieged areas at almost 1 million people.

Aid must reach those people. Unless we see an improvement, November will be the worst month yet for efforts to deliver aid to besieged and hard to reach areas across Syria. Not one single humanitarian convoy has reached any of those areas on the UN's plan this month.

Those are two simple steps. And they must be taken if we are to have a chance of that most elusive of third step; political talks that will bring an end to this horrific conflict.

As I have said many times before, Russia has a unique role to play in all three of those steps. To persuade the regime to end its destructive military approach, to allow full humanitarian access to all besieged areas, and to commit to a political settlement to end this brutal war.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-all-want-to-counter-terrorism-in-syria-but-attacks-on-schools-and-hospitals-are-not-counter-terrorist-operations