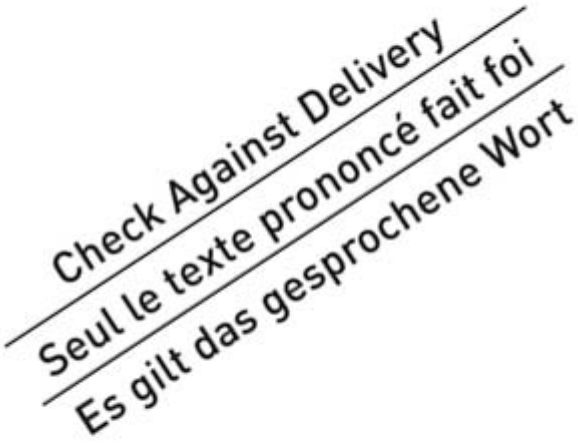
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Catherine Ashton
High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission

Speech by HRVP Catherine Ashton on Syria



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Mr President thank you.

May I thank you, Honourable Members, very much for the early start of this debate.

Honourable Members, on the 21st of August 2013 we saw chemical weapons were used to kill hundreds of people, which constituted a war crime and a crime against humanity, running contrary to all values shared by the international community. We have had extensive discussions, both within the Ministers' meeting in Vilnius where we were joined both by Elmar Brok, in his capacity of Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs - and I thank him for his attendance - and by Secretary Kerry, who came to an extraordinary session of the meeting to talk with us about Syria and about the events in the region. We agreed there and then that a strong international response was needed in the face of this crime and that we have to prevent impunity and prevent creating a horrific precedent for the use of chemical weapons.

Of course we are now paying great attention to the developments that we are following hour by hour, with the Russian proposal built on the words of Secretary Kerry and the discussions which took place in St. Petersburg. Namely, to put Syria's chemical weapons under international surveillance. But I will come back to that, if I may, in a moment.

Because I also think that we need to remember the broader picture of what's happening in Syria. In these past weeks, we witnessed yet another round of spiralling violence in the country. The regime has stepped up its military campaign against the opposition-held areas, sometimes taking recourse to indiscriminate shelling of entire neighbourhoods.

We have seen deeply disturbing reports of increased violence along confessional and ethnic lines, attacks against the Alawi population at the hands of extremist rebel groups, followed by a harsh response from the regime. Some Christian communities have been targeted recently. And in the north east, intensive fighting involving the Syrian Kurds lasted for weeks and resulted in increased refugee flows to Iraq.

I want to commend the UN investigation mission for engaging in their field inquiry into the attack of the 21st of August with courage and speed in what was very obviously an extremely difficult security situation. It is now of the utmost importance that they complete their report as soon as possible, that the work going on in laboratories in Sweden, in Finland and elsewhere gives us the information, confirmed through this report that is already established through other reports that many member states and international partners have been engaged in.

We have seen that there is an assessment coming forward that only the regime possesses chemical agents and means of their delivery in a sufficient quantity to have carried out the attack on the 21st of August. It is really important that we recognize that information, as well. And the conclusion that so many have already reached, that therefore the regime was behind the attack and this leads them to support an international response by force given the blockage of the Security Council.

We have consistently emphasised the need for efforts in the Security Council to try and effectively end this conflict. I say again that the role of the Security Council is crucial and irreplaceable but it does rely on the Members of the Security Council taking their responsibilities. And it is deeply regrettable that they have not yet shouldered that responsibility with regard to this conflict.

Internationally, we have worked with all partners: with the US, with Russia, with the UN, with many Arab nations, to achieve a united international response in the light of the developments that we see taking place in Syria now.

I have already referred to the meeting in Vilnius, where we found a common language from all 28 Member States. Some had already signed up the language of the G20 and some might argue that our language is not quite the same. But I think we formulated a substantial EU position:

The condemnation of the chemical attack; the recognition of the apparent evidence of the regime's responsibility; the necessity for the international community to respond and a strong call on the Security Council to fulfil its responsibilities; the emphasis, which has been made consistently by all that I have spoken to, on a political solution and support for what has become known as the Geneva II initiative; and our commitment to providing aid on a continuing basis now and in to the future.

Now let me say a little bit more about the most recent developments which, as I said, are continuing hour by hour. Russia has proposed putting the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal under international control and destroying it eventually. We see that the Syrian foreign minister, Mr al-Moualem, when he was in Moscow, welcomed this proposal. The UN Secretary-General is urging the Security Council along these lines and support is coming from many directions.

I think it's very important to take this momentum and to use it. Because what we are seeing for the first time in a long time, it's the international community uniting towards an action on Syria. But, Honourable Members, we need to proceed with care and examine the developments in detail. First of all, to ensure that the Syrian regime not only says it will agree to an international action but it must do so quickly, fully and without conditions. It has to follow up with transparency and to make sure that it adheres to all the requirements. It needs to be a different response, in other words, from the response we have had in the past. Broken promises, obstacles put in the way of international efforts.

Honourable Members, we have discussed many times the fact that it has to be a political solution that can deliver the Syrian people from this traumatic experience, from the suffering, from the ruin of the country and the people, and the total disregard, that we see so often, for human rights.

It’s extremely important that the plight of the refugees is not ignored, and that we continue to find not only ways of putting more resources at the disposal of the refugee population but also of finding better and smarter and quicker ways to provide the resources that are needed, especially to the people who are suffering inside the country.

And those, Honourable Members, who have talked to the UN or talked with our Commissioner Georgieva on this subject, and the people who are going to Syria on a regular basis would know just how complex it is to try and move support, medical aid and supplies, food and so on across parts of the country, many of which are held by different groups in a very difficult situation. We, of course, continue, by the way, to send in missions, on a regular basis, to Syria.

The latest developments, therefore, are an opportunity to reinvigorate not just trying to sort out the chemical weapons issue but the broader political dimension. And I hope that we will seize the opportunity to try and urge all to do this.

We know that tomorrow Secretary Kerry will meet with Minister Lavrov in Geneva to try and work up exactly what this initiative might mean, to get into the detail of what would have to happen and when and how and by whom. And we put the EU at the disposal of the work that is on-going in order to see how we can contribute. Not if but how. But it's also important to try and move ahead and get this peace process moving.

Some honourable members will no doubt in the course of your deliberations argue that the threat of strikes has been the most important element in bringing the initiative to the table that can try and tackle chemical weapons.

Whatever your view, the reality is that this is a moment to try and pull towards the process that is so necessary to find a political solution and we need to engage with all partners, as we are doing, to find ways to achieve that. We will continue to work to that end.

But I've also mentioned the on-going humanitarian disaster. We have already provided € 1.3 billion between the institutions of the European Union and Member States. But the honourable members will know too that the UN estimates that much more is going to be needed and we need to prepare for the end of this conflict and the re-building of a nation which by many figures is 70 per cent or so destroyed.

Not to mention the lives of people that have been destroyed, the people who have been killed, the children who have been orphaned, the people who have been badly injured. There is a huge amount that is going to be necessary to do.

So we have to reaffirm our commitment to the people of Syria, to support them in every way possible through our humanitarian aid, to support them in a political process that can bring them peace, to do that by being prepared to work out on the ground how that can happen, place by place, as well as across the whole nation, being able and willing to support the moves to get rid of the chemical weapons, and being prepared to work with our international partners in a process that can make the Security Council do its work but also ensure that we respond to the challenge as well.

Honourable members, I hope the resolution you will put forward will be able to help and support the work that is on-going by the EU to do that.

And I thank you for it.