

International Impartial and Independent Mechanism and Syria: statement to the UN General Assembly

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Speech

Statement by Karen Pierce, UK Permanent Representative, at the UN General Assembly debate on the mechanism to ensure accountability for the atrocities in Syria.

From:

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Thank you very much, Mr Chairman, and we associate ourselves with the statement made earlier by the European Union. This first report of the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM (International Impartial and Independent Mechanism)) is

extremely welcome. It's an important initiative from Lichtenstein and Qatar and we join other colleagues in congratulating Catherine Marchi-Uhel, on her professionalism in setting it up.

The establishment of the ~~IIIM (International Impartial and Independent Mechanism)~~ was an important step forward in ensuring accountability for the horrific atrocities that have been committed in Syria. These include torture in Asad's prisons, the unlawful targeting of civilians and civilian objects, including medical facilities, and as everyone knows, the use of chemical weapons. It's up to all of us to support the ~~IIIM (International Impartial and Independent Mechanism)~~ in building and bringing cases against perpetrators before any competent tribunal.

The UK strongly supports the ~~IIIM (International Impartial and Independent Mechanism)~~. We co-sponsored the United Nations General Assembly (~~UNGA (United Nations General Assembly)~~) resolution in December 2016 that set it up and we have contributed over a quarter million dollars to its start-up costs. We will make a further contribution later this year and I take this opportunity to encourage all Member States financially to support this important mechanism.

The barbaric chemical weapons attack in Douma on the Syrian people 11 days ago cost up to 75 lives including those of young children. But it was only the latest atrocity in this seven year conflict. We must ensure that those responsible for this crime are held to account. And I would like to take this opportunity to take a few moments now to set out the UK's response along with French and American allies to the attack on Douma. Mr Chairman, the military action we took last week was a strictly limited operation. We have published our legal position on our action. As it sets out, the action was taken to alleviate the extreme humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people by degrading the Asad regime's chemical weapons capability and by deterring their further use. We determined that there was no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives were to be saved and that the strikes were necessary and proportionate, the minimum necessary.

Mr President, it cannot be illegal to use force to prevent the killing of such numbers of people. We hope our actions will also uphold the international norms prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. I would like to stress this is not about intervening in a civil war or about regime change. And it was not about a one-off use of chemical weapons by the Asad regime. Four cases, including one of Sarin, were documented by the Joint Investigative Mechanism (~~JIM (Joint Investigative Mechanism)~~) before it was shut down in 2017. We cannot allow the use of chemical weapons, which as everyone knows are prohibited under international law, to become normal, either within Syria or elsewhere.

In 2014 Russia vetoed a resolution calling for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court (~~ICC (International Criminal Court)~~) so that there could be accountability for all the atrocities that we have seen in Syria. To date, Russia has vetoed 12 Security Council resolutions aimed at alleviating the plight of the Syrian people. This makes the work of the ~~IIIM (International Impartial and Independent Mechanism)~~ even more important.

We commend the work that it has already undertaken to establish cooperation with Syrian civil society, international organisations including the UN Commission of Inquiry and Member States. We encourage the ~~IIIM (International Impartial and Independent Mechanism)~~ to investigate chemical weapon attacks, particularly in the absence of any international attribution mechanism for chemical weapon.

We must demonstrate that those who have committed the most serious crimes of international concern can have no place to hide. There must be no impunity for the horrendous acts taking place on a daily basis in Syria. There must be justice for the victims. It may take a long time. Sadly, I fear it will take a long time but there must be justice. I'd like to close if I may Mr President by just endorsing what the French ambassador had to say about next steps on the political side and assuring the General Assembly that the United Kingdom will devote every effort to that end.

Thank you.

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