Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Office Minister discusses Syria at UN Human Rights Council

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In his address to the Human Rights Council the Foreign Office Minister said:

“I am delighted to be here in Geneva and it is a great honour to address the Council as the UK’s Foreign Office Minister responsible for human rights policy.

A year ago, William Hague, our Foreign Secretary, addressed this Council, praising its remarkable response to events in the Middle East. He was referring in particular to the Council’s actions in response to the crisis in Libya. Today we are facing a different crisis in the region, this time in Syria, where the Commission of Inquiry mandated by this Council has concluded that crimes against humanity have been committed by Syrian forces.

Syria

We have all seen the images of the destruction and suffering caused by the Syrian forces’ bombardment of Homs and other cities. We have read with horror of the ongoing human rights violations committed by the regime - of thousands of civilians killed, of small children targeted by government snipers, of hospitals transformed into torture centres, and of executions carried out in places of worship. This is why the British Government has strongly supported the League of Arab States’ call for the Syrian government to cease all violence and protect its population.

I am very concerned that abuses are also being committed by members of anti-government groups in Syria, although it is clear that these are on a far smaller scale than the widespread and systematic violations perpetrated by the Syrian authorities. I call on all parties in Syria to end the violence immediately and to respect human rights standards.

The Syrian authorities must allow unhindered, neutral and impartial access for humanitarian organisations in line with the statement issued on Friday by the Friends of Syria Group, the UNGA resolution of 16 February, and the League of Arab States’ initiative. I welcome the decision of the UN Secretary General and the League of Arab States to appoint Kofi Annan as their special envoy on the Syrian crisis.

Those responsible for the terrible atrocities in Syria should be in no doubt: they will be personally held to account for the appalling crimes which they have committed. The

Commission of Inquiry has already compiled a confidential list of suspects, and we will re-double our efforts in this Council and with partners in the international community to ensure that there will be no impunity for violations and abuses of human rights perpetrated in Syria.

We remain fully committed to upholding Syria's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will continue to work with the League of Arab States and the Friends of Syria Group to support a process of political transition in Syria. In the face of violence, intimidation and torture the Syrian people continue to demand a society where they can exercise their basic human rights freely and without discrimination. We have been clear that the Syrian regime must respect these legitimate aspirations for freedom and dignity. And we should do our utmost to help the Syrian people realise these aspirations.

I welcome all the action which this Council has taken in response to the situation in Syria. The Commission of Inquiry established by Council Members has played a key part, not only in gathering evidence of atrocities, but also in providing a reliable and independent source of information about the deteriorating situation in Syria. It is essential that this process should continue, and I urge Council members to pass a resolution extending the Commission's mandate.

I would also like to thank the High Commissioner for the vital role she has played in keeping the international community focused on the human rights situation in Syria and elsewhere. We will continue to champion the independence of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights so that the High Commissioner and her office can carry on their valuable work to promote and protect human rights around the world.

Other Countries of Concern

Looking forward to other issues covered in this Council session, I am pleased to see that it will address the human rights situations in Iran, Burma, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and others. I hope the countries concerned will take heed.

11. We, as UN member States, must take seriously our human rights obligations and, where States fail, the institutions of the UN should act and support change. Such actions are what make the Council an effective human rights body, able to scrutinise States' compliance with their obligations and offer technical assistance. I hope the Sri Lankan Government will see that it is in this spirit of support and co-operation that countries call on them to implement the recommendations made by their Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission.

Freedom of Expression

But the Council's role goes beyond addressing human rights concerns in specific countries. It is extremely important that the Council also continues to address the thematic human rights

issues which cut across a range of country situations. One thematic issue which has had considerable prominence over the past 12 months is the right to freedom of expression.

This is fundamental to a healthy civil society; it underpins democracy and the realisation of many other human rights. With the proliferation of people connected to the internet, digital technology has rapidly become a key medium through which to exercise this right. I believe that journalists, bloggers and individuals must be allowed to express themselves freely and safely online as they do offline, in accordance with international human rights standards.

This freedom is vital in holding government to account and ensuring that its power is checked. But of course many governments do not wish to be accountable to their people and want to remove all checks on their power. In Syria, for example, prominent human rights defenders such as Mazen Darwish and others have been detained because of the threat they pose to the government. The tragic deaths of Marie Colvin, Remi Ochlik and Rami al-Said while reporting with great bravery from Homs is a terrible reminder of the risks that journalists take to report the truth. We remain concerned for the safety of Paul Conroy and are working hard to secure his safe exit from Syria.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to emphasise the UK's own commitment to strengthen human rights, both domestically and internationally. We strive to be a powerful example of a county that upholds these rights, judging ourselves by the highest standards and taking corrective action where we fall short.

This commitment is at the heart of the UK's human rights goals for this year. As one of the first countries to undergo a second Universal Periodic Review, we will set a high standard of consultation with civil society and constructive participation throughout the process. We will campaign for re-election to this Council with a set of pledges designed to show the seriousness with which we take the responsibility which comes with membership. We will use our role as host nation for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games to promote inclusiveness and equality for all. And we will continue to play an active and forthright role in international institutions that promote and protect human rights, like this very Council.

Thank you Madam President, Madam High Commissioner

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