Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary Statement at Syria Conference in Brussels

2017-04-05

I want to thank all of our co-hosts today and you in particular, Federica and the European Union as well as the seventy nations and international organisations that are here today.

Let me begin by saying: I think it is impossible for us to ignore, as many colleagues have said, the horrific gas attack that took place yesterday. And although we can't be certain yet, this attack bears all the hallmarks of an action by the regime that has repeatedly used chemical weapons against its own people. Today we are calling, together with our French friends, an emergency session of the UNSC.

And we must accept the paradox of this meeting today. We're all here together trying to assemble a vast multi billion sticking plaster for Syria, when there are still governments here supporting the Assad-regime which is inflicting those wounds, caused by weapons that were banned internationally a century ago. And our publics can see that paradox. They can see what's going on. As Sigmar Gabriel has rightly said, they will not accept that their money should go in any way to those responsible for these crimes. But at the same time we have to accept this scale of the humanitarian suffering when the bloodshed began in 2011,

Syrians population stood at 20 million and in the last 6 years an absolute majority have been either killed or forced to flee. One in two Syrians dead or displaced. There is no other conflict like it in the world. And that's why what we're doing today is so important. I hope we can make progress and go further than the London conference. After the Prime Minister's, the UK PM announcement this week, the British government pledge almost £2.5 billion for Syria and the region making the UK the second biggest bilateral humanitarian donor since 2012.

We are all humbled by the contribution and sacrifice of our friends who have spoken earlier today from Lebanon, from Jordan and of course Turkey, who set a moral example to the world by their willingness to accept millions of refugees. Other countries in the region and beyond have also taken in many millions and many fugitives from Syria's tragedy and we should work together to help refugees gain an education and find work so that they can contribute to the economies of their host countries and eventually support themselves in a peaceful Syria.

For that to happen, Syria will need a political settlement including a genuine transition to a new government and the task of reconstruction cannot begin until a credible transition is underway. We need a proper ceasefire and we need to recognise that the UN-led talks represent the surest pass to peace and we strongly support the efforts of Staffan de Mistura including the negotiations that resumed in Geneva last week.

But as we sit here in Brussels it is still the case that the regime is preventing the UN from delivering aid to millions of Syrians, besieging over 475,000 people with the aim of starving them into submission. Not a single UN convoy has been allowed to reach Eastern Ghouta, an area of some 400,000 inhabitants since October 29th last year. And yet within easy reach there are UN warehouses stuffed with food and medical supplies.

Together we should make clear our abhorrence of the regimes' tactic of starve or surrender. We must remind all sides of their obligation contained in numerous UN resolutions to allow aid to reach all who need it wherever they may be. Colleagues, the people of Syria are today paying a price for our collective inaction over the last 5 years and the decisions we took. We cannot now undo those mistakes but we can and we must work together to alleviate their suffering, to help Syria's neighbours and to prepare Syria for the moment when peace finally returns for the sake of future generations of Syrians and indeed for the entire world.

Thank you.

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