Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"The conflict in Syria is almost 5 years old. In that time 250,000 Syrians have been killed. We all have a duty to prevent further slaughter."

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Thank you Mr. President.

Let me begin by thanking the Secretary-General, and his Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for all that they are doing to bring the Syrian parties together.

And let me also thank you Secretary Kerry for the characteristic drive and energy that you have brought over recent months to this process in establishing the International Syria Support Group. This has given new international momentum towards the resumption of Syrian-led talks and has brought us to this important occasion today.

The resolution we have adopted today is a further step in this work. Sadly, it is far too soon for any of us to predict an end to the Syria conflict, but I hope that we will look back on today as a significant step in that direction. Frankly, on Syria this Council has too seldom found the unity it needed to live up to its responsibility for delivering peace and security, despite some useful but only partially implemented Resolutions. This has to change.

No country, no person who has been involved in Syria’s destruction in the last four years can take any satisfaction from what has happened. On the Syria dossier we have to concede we have all failed; we have all been losers; but by far the greatest losers are the people of Syria themselves. We have to do better and we have to do better fast if there is not be still more suffering.

The participants in the ISSG came together behind a single aim: to support the Syrian parties to find an end to the conflict and tackle the terrorists currently operating in their country. We all share the sense of urgency which comes from witnessing the continuing deterioration of the humanitarian and security situation in Syria. The Syrian population, over 250,000 of whom have been killed and millions more forced from their homes, have borne the brunt of this conflict. This is not a humanitarian disaster; it is a humanitarian catastrophe.

The ongoing indiscriminate use of weapons on civilians, especially artillery and aerial bombardments, including barrel bombs, continues to cause terror, destruction and civilian

deaths. And while Daesh poses a real threat to Syrians as well as to the wider region, it is Asad who bears the responsibility for the majority of the deaths in Syria.

Mr President,

I commend Saudi Arabia for convening a broad cross-section of representatives of the Syrian opposition in Riyadh earlier this month. The agreement reached at that meeting in Riyadh and the formation of a high negotiating committee showed the determination of the Syrian Opposition groups to come together, whatever their differences, to play a crucial, constructive role in talks. They reaffirmed their commitment to implementation of the Geneva Communique, working towards a managed transition away from Asad and a pluralistic future for Syria.

I welcome too Jordan's efforts to build consensus on identifying terrorist groups operating in Syria. Whilst it is for this Council ultimately to decide to designate any such groups, the ISSG is in a privileged position to provide information, analysis and advice to the Council to assist it. We believe that it will take time to mature that view and we are able to test which groups are willing to commit to a political process and a ceasefire.

Mr President,

I would like to turn to the content of the Resolution and highlight the areas that will be critical to the progress of talks.

First, all of us - both in this Council and in the broader international community - want to see a national ceasefire established. To have a realistic chance of success, a ceasefire must be closely aligned to progress on political transition and talks between the Syrian parties and under UN auspices. We've seen previous attempts to end the conflict in Syria undermined by a lack of determination by the parties to contribute productively to talks.

It is critical that the voices of all Syrians are heard in this process, including Syrian women and members of Syrian minorities.

Second, there needs to be confidence amongst the parties that the political process will deliver real results, without which neither the talks nor the ceasefire will be successful. This will not be easy: 5 years of conflict has eroded confidence.

Therefore all parties must undertake Confidence Building Measures, some of which are identified in the resolution we've passed today. We welcome the work being undertaken by the UN to this end, and towards modalities for a ceasefire as mandated by this Resolution.

All parties have a duty to take care in their military actions not to cause the death of civilians whether by deliberate or by reckless targeting. The indiscriminate use of weapons, especially the use of artillery and aerial bombardments including barrel bombs, must stop. Medical

facilities and schools have increasingly become a target for aerial bombardment, something that is abhorrent to all of us and must stop.

All parties must adhere to their duties under International Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. They must allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria by most direct routes. There are 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. These people need to see a change to their lives if they are to have confidence in this political process and to feel its benefits. The UK is the second largest bilateral donor to the humanitarian effort in response to the Syrian conflict after the United States. But let us all do more on this front.

This resolution also repeats a commitment to political transition in Syria, following the principles of the Geneva Communiqué in full, and leading to free and fair elections under a new Syrian constitution within 18 months. This will involve the establishment of a Transitional Governing Body with full executive powers and representative of all Syrians, which provides the framework for talks and an end to the conflict.

This process necessarily involves the departure of Bashar al-Asad. Not only for moral reasons, because of the destruction he has unleashed upon his own people, but also for practical reasons, because it will never be possible to bring peace and unity to Syria as long as he remains in office. But we must and will protect the institutions that are necessary for the future governance, and that will be possible with a representative Transitional Governing Body and with the support of the ISSG.

Mr President,

Whilst we must seek to end the conflict in Syria, especially the violence that is directed against civilians, we must also join in confronting the threat posed by Daesh and other extremist groups in the country. An end to the civil war in Syria is critical to tackling Daesh in the long term. We are all clear that terrorist groups must not and will not benefit from ceasefire we are promoting.

A key consideration for the Syrians in the establishment of the Transitional Governing Body will be the fight against terrorism. In this fight they will have the full support of the ISSG and of the Global Coalition. Following the appalling attacks in Sinai, Beirut, Ankara and Paris, this Council unanimously decided to adopt resolution 2249 which calls on countries to use all necessary means to combat Daesh. The UK responded to this resolution by extending the airstrikes we were already carrying out in Iraq against Daesh into Syria.

In this regard it is vital that those countries that claim to be fighting Daesh do what they say, rather than directing the bulk of their attacks against non-extremist opposition groups. There is clear evidence over the last weeks that the weakening such groups has created

opportunities for the expansion of Daesh in some areas, the very opposite of the stated objective.

Mr President,

As well as focusing on the immediate threats, we must also prepare for the future in Syria. We must affirm our commitment to assist in the post-conflict reconstruction of the country. Next February, in close partnership with Germany, Norway, Kuwait and the UN, the UK will co-host a conference in London on humanitarian support for Syria including a focus on civilian protection as well as planning for stabilisation. Of course Mr President, that conference will seek to raise the funding that is necessary to meet the United Nations appeal to support those displaced by the humanitarian crisis. But the UK is also committed to support post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Syria and has already committed to provide at least 1.5 billion dollars to this work in the long term in addition to the over 1.64 billion dollars we have so far given in humanitarian aid and I hope in February we will see others committing to both the immediate challenge and to the long term challenge of reconstruction.

In conclusion Mr President,

The conflict in Syria is now almost 5 years old. In that time more than 250,000 Syrians have been killed. We all have a duty to prevent further slaughter.

Despite the important step we have taken with today's Resolution, despite the progress we made in Vienna, despite the important steps forward made at the meeting in Riyadh the week before last, there is still a very long way to go.

And to have a chance of success, the United Nations will need the clear and continued support of the International Syria Support Group and I know that I can say that it will have the support of that group.

But above all, we need Syrian leaders of all persuasions to take responsibility for the future of their country and to take the tough decisions needed to bring about a lasting political settlement and an end to the conflict.

Because we can help, but only Syrians can bring an end to Syrian suffering.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-conflict-in-syria-is-almost-5-years-old-in-that-time-250000-syrians-have-been-killed-we-all-have-a-duty-to-prevent-further-slaughter