Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary updates Parliament on Middle East and North Africa

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In a statement to Parliament updating on the situation in the Middle East and North Africa the Foreign Secretary said:

Britain has continued to take a leading role in international efforts to protect civilians in Libya and the case for action remains compelling: Qadhafi's regime persists in attacking its own people, wilfully killing its own civilian population.

Our strategy is to intensify the diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Qadhafi's regime and since the House last met we have made progress on all those fronts.

On the diplomatic front, I co-chaired the first meeting of the Libya Contact Group in Doha on 13 April. The 21 states and seven international organisations represented demonstrated clear unity with participation from across the Arab world and the African Union in attendance. The Group agreed that Qadhafi's regime had lost all legitimacy, that the National Transitional Council should be offered further support and that the UN Special Envoy should take forward an inclusive political process. I will attend the next Contact Group meeting in Rome on 5 May.

At the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in Berlin on 14 and 15 April, I joined colleagues in showing our determination to increase the pace of military operations to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1973. The 28 NATO Member States and 6 Arab countries that attended, 16 of which out of the 34 are engaged in military action, agreed a common strategy. That is an important milestone in world affairs, a sign of a growing ability to work across traditional regional divisions and a demonstration of the breadth and unity in the international coalition in support of the Libyan people.

On the economic front, since my statement on 4 April, further Libyan entities have been sanctioned and the regime is now subject to some of the most comprehensive economic sanctions ever agreed by the United Nations.

On military matters, since NATO assumed full control over all military operations on 31 March, more than 3500 sorties and 1500 strike sorties have been conducted. This action has seriously degraded Qadhafi's military assets and prevented widespread massacres planned by Qadhafi's forces: they remain unable to enter Benghazi and it is highly likely that without

these efforts Misrata would have fallen, with terrible consequences for that city's brave inhabitants.

Yesterday Italy announced that its aircraft would take part in ground strikes and the United States Government has contributed Predator unmanned aerial vehicles to the coalition forces. My Right Hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence is in Washington today to discuss the military situation.

Heavy fighting continues around the towns of Brega, Ajdabiya, Yefren and Misrata. The regime's indiscriminate shelling of residential areas in Misrata shows that it continues to target the civilian population.

Qadhafi has shown that he has no regard for civilian lives. The ICC prosecutor has said that there is evidence of a case against Qadhafi for crimes against humanity. We look forward to the prosecutor's report to the UN on 4 May.

By his actions it is clear that Qadhafi has no intention of observing the conditions in UNSCR 1973 that I described to the House earlier this month. He has repeatedly ignored the ceasefires that he himself has announced.

Our military action is defined by the UN Security Council Resolutions. We are also clear that Qadhafi should go, and it is impossible to see a viable or peaceful way forward for Libya until he does so.

The Libya Contact Group's statement made clear that, in contrast to Qadhafi, we and our allies regard the National Transitional Council as a legitimate interlocutor, representing the aspirations of the Libyan people. Our diplomatic mission in Benghazi is working with it. Our Special Envoy, Christopher Prentice, will shortly be succeeded by John Jenkins, currently Her Majesty's Ambassador in Baghdad.

Last week I announced our decision to expand this mission with a small advisory team of British military officers. Their sole purpose is to support the NTC's efforts better to protect civilians by advising on military organisational structures, communications and logistics. They are not involved in training or arming the opposition's forces, nor are they executing or providing operational military advice.

This is fully in line with the UN Resolutions and I reiterate to the House that we will remain wholly in accordance with the UN Resolutions, retaining the moral, legal and international authority that flows from that.

We have supplied vital, non-lethal equipment to assist the NTC in protecting civilian lives. So far this consists of telecommunications equipment and body armour. We are considering with our international partners further requests.

In the coming week, we hope to agree internationally the process for establishing a Temporary Financial Mechanism to provide a transparent structure for international financial support for the financial requirements of the NTC such as public sector pay. Yesterday Kuwait announced around 110 million pounds' worth of support for the NTC.

I am sure the House will join me in paying tribute to the skill, bravery and professionalism of the men and women of the UK's and allies' armed forces. Their actions in the NATO operations have already saved many lives and their efforts are essential to bringing a lasting peace and a better future for the Libyan people who have suffered so much at the hands of this brutal regime. And I also pay tribute to the brave humanitarian workers who put their lives at risk.

The UK is also supporting the other needs of the Libyan people in every way we can. The humanitarian situation in the West of the country is getting worse every day. Many civilians in Misrata lack access to basic necessities, including food, water and electricity. There is a shortage of some crucial medical supplies.

That is why my Rt Hon. Friend the International Development Secretary announced last week that the UK will provide medical and other emergency supplies and undertake evacuations for 5000 migrants stranded at Misrata port in squalid conditions. The UK has so far given over £13 million to meet immediate humanitarian needs, providing funding for medical and food supplies, emergency shelter, and assistance for evacuating poor and vulnerable migrants. In Misrata alone, British support has given 10,000 people food, 2000 families water and hygiene kits and provided essential medical staff. But the regime must guarantee unfettered humanitarian access, not just broken promises which then put the lives of aid workers and volunteers at risk.

The wave of demand for change in the Arab World continues to gain momentum in other nations. As I said earlier today we condemn utterly the violence and killings perpetrated by the Syrian security forces against civilians who are expressing their views in peaceful protests. This violent repression must stop. President Assad should order his authorities to show restraint and to respond to the legitimate demands of his people with immediate and genuine reform, not with brutal repression. The Emergency Law should be lifted in practice and the legitimate aspirations of the people met.

The United Kingdom is working intensively with our international partners to persuade the Syrian authorities to stop the violence and respect basic and universal human rights to freedoms of expression and assembly.

Syria is now at a fork in the road. Its Government can still choose to bring about the radical reform which alone can provide peace and stability in Syria and for the long term, and we urge it do so. Or it can choose ever more violent repression, which can only bring short term

security for the authorities there. If it does so we will work with our European partners and others to take measures, including sanctions, that will have an impact on the regime.

Given our concerns for British Nationals in Syria we changed our Travel Advice on Sunday to advise against all travel there and to advise that British Nationals should leave unless there is a pressing need for them to remain.

In Yemen, the United Kingdom welcomes the news this morning that the efforts of the Gulf Co-operation Council countries to resolve the current political deadlock are close to success. I understand that President Saleh and the parliamentary opposition have accepted the GCC's proposal. This is potentially good news.

Both sides now need to come together to confirm their commitment to the peaceful, inclusive and timely transition process that the GCC has brokered. The UK remains committed to our long-standing support for Yemen in these difficult times.

Although the immediate situation in Bahrain is calmer, there continue to be credible reports of human rights abuses. I urge the Government of Bahrain to meet all its human rights obligations and uphold political freedoms, equal access to justice and the rule of law. Dialogue is the way to fulfil the aspirations of all Bahrainis. And I urge all sides, including opposition groupings, to engage with each other.

In Egypt, which I will visit shortly, we welcome the actions being taken by the authorities to move towards a broad-based, civilian-led government and an open, democratic society.

In Tunisia, with EU partners we are providing support to help the government in Tunisia meet the wishes of the Tunisian people. On 11 April, the Commission responsible for bringing together opposition parties and civil society approved the draft law for the Constituent Assembly elections scheduled for 24 July. This is a step further towards free and fair elections and an open, democratic society.

The European Union has a crucial role to play in the southern Mediterranean. The great changes in the Arab world are truly historic and the response from the nations of the European Union should be bold and ambitious.

The review of the European Neighbourhood Policy is due to be published in a fortnight. We have been making the case that we have the opportunity to use that Policy to help the peoples of the Southern Mediterranean achieve their desire for freer and more prosperous societies. A renewed Neighbourhood Policy should see the EU using its economic magnetism to encourage and support political and economic reform in neighbouring countries. A partnership of equals should reward those who make the necessary political and economic reforms, and - importantly - withdraw benefits from those who do not.

Finally, it remains essential that progress is made in the search for a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is what the majority of Palestinians and Israelis demand of their leaders. The extraordinary changes in the region are an opportunity to be seized, not an excuse for further prevarication leading to more frustration and discontent.

Mr Speaker, in our response to the dramatic events in North Africa and the Middle East we will continue to stand for reform not repression, for the addressing of grievances rather than brutal reprisals. It is a policy in accordance with our own beliefs, in line with our own national interest, and in pursuit of the peace and prosperity of the wider world.

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