Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

# Gifting of chemical weapons protective equipment to the Syrian Opposition

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As I told the House on 10th July, we are faced with a growing and protracted crisis in Syria. We have to be prepared to do more to save lives. There is evidence of attacks using chemical weapons in Syria - including sarin. We believe that the use of chemical weapons is sanctioned and ordered by the Assad regime.

I explained on 10th July that we are exploring the possibility of supplying the Syrian Opposition protective equipment against chemical and biological weapons use and yesterday I laid a Minute before Parliament providing more detail on these plans. We plan to equip the moderate armed opposition with 5000 escape hoods, nerve-agent pre-treatment tablets (NAPs) and chemical weapons detector paper.

Escape hoods protect against sarin gas for approximately 20 minutes, allowing a person to move away from an affected area but not enabling them to continue to fight. They do not require fitting or extensive training to be effective. Pre-treatment with NAPs gives a person who is exposed to a nerve agent (including sarin) a greater chance of reaching a place where atropine can be administered under medical supervision. Chemical weapons detector paper enables the basic detection of chemical weapons agents. The capability to detect quickly whether chemical weapons agents are present will inform decisions on whether or not to remain in an area and so potentially save lives.

The gift will be offered to the Supreme Military Council of the Syrian National Coalition, which the UK recognises as the sole legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. The approximate total cost of the equipment in the proposed gift is £656,800 which will be met by the Government’s Conflict Pool Fund.

It is normal practice when a government department proposes to make a gift of a value exceeding £250,000, for the department concerned to present to the House of Commons a Minute giving the particulars of the gift and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from making the gift until fourteen parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the Minute, except in cases of special urgency.

In this case, making the gift is a matter of special urgency. The rapidly deteriorating situation in Syria and the urgent need to support the Syrian opposition means that the Government

needs to act as soon as possible. We put great value on the scrutiny provided by parliament, but summer recess means that it is unfortunately not possible to allow 14 sitting days for the House to consider the gifting minute. In this case, we will not proceed with plans to make the gift until a period of 14 working days after the minute has been laid has expired. If there are no objections, we will proceed with plans to make the gift on or after 3rd August 2013.

The use of Conflict Pool funds to cover the costs of this gift has been approved by the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Secretary of State for International Development. FCO and MOD officials have also assessed the gift against the Consolidated Criteria and the gift does not cross the risk thresholds in the consolidated criteria provided adequate measures are put in place to mitigate the risk of diversion. In assessing the risks of providing these materials, the FCO's Counter Terrorism Department and the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT) have been consulted and agree the recommendation to provide the gift. This gift is also consistent with HMG's agreed policy on Syria.

This gift has undergone intense scrutiny to ensure that we are providing the best possible support to the Syrian Opposition and that we meet all our national and international obligations.

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