Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary discusses Libya and Middle East issues with Italian Foreign Minister

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Speaking after the meeting the Foreign Secretary said:

“It is a great pleasure to welcome Franco Frattini to the United Kingdom today and to host him here in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Italy is our close friend in Europe, a robust and like-minded partner in foreign and security policy, and one of our oldest allies anywhere in the world. This year marks 150 years since the Unification of Italy, and we are proud that Britain was the first country in the world to recognise a modern, unified Italy. Our relations have gone from strength to strength since then.

Much of our discussion today concerned events in the Middle East and North Africa. This is a historic moment of opportunity for the region to achieve greater political and economic freedom, and for human rights to be advanced. We discussed the need to transform the European Union’s neighbourhood policy, so that it becomes a truly bold and visionary programme capable of encouraging such positive change and responding to the aspirations of people in the region. This should be one of the very top priorities of European external affairs over the coming months. We must seize every opportunity to support democratic change and to stand up for our values in a way that goes beyond words to action and long term assistance.

We agreed that the situation in Syria is deeply troubling, and that violence against protestors is unacceptable. I call again on the Syrian government to respect the right to free speech and to peaceful protest, and to put in train the meaningful political reform which is the only legitimate response to demands from the Syrian people.

We discussed the need for a political transition in Yemen to begin immediately; we agreed to continue to work closely on international pressure and engagement over Iran’s nuclear programme, and we spoke of the need for urgent progress on the Middle East Peace Process.

Today British and Italian military forces and diplomats are working side by side with our allies to protect the lives of civilians in Libya and to support a peaceful and democratic future for

that country. I want to put on record our gratitude to the government of Italy for its strong military and political support to the international coalition, and for its assistance with military bases including for our Royal Air Force aircraft.

The action we are taking in Libya is necessary, it is legal, it is the right thing to do and it has saved many lives already. We should never forget that this crisis was precipitated entirely by a regime that turned its guns, and the full weight of oppression on peaceful and unarmed protestors, and that in doing so has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the world. It is our position and that of our allies that Colonel Qadhafi must go. I met Libya's former Ambassador to the United Nations Mr Shalqam this morning. He agreed with me that there can be no peaceful future for Libya that involves Colonel Qadhafi, and that he must leave power.

There has been no change to the conditions that the Qadhafi regime must meet since they were set out by President Obama and by our Prime Minister and others. That means an end to all attacks and abuses against civilians. That means a genuine and real ceasefire, the withdrawal of regime forces from cities and the full flow of humanitarian assistance to the people of Libya. There should be no ceasefire that does not meet the conditions of UNSC Resolutions 1970 and 1973 in full, and that is not acceptable to those representing the opposition in Libya, including the Interim National Council. Anything short of this would be a betrayal of the people of Libya and would play into the hands of the regime, which has announced two utterly meaningless ceasefires since the fighting began, without its vicious military campaign skipping a single beat. And we will therefore continue to judge the regime by its actions and not its words.

Franco and I will both be in Qatar this week for the first meeting of the Contact Group on Libya that was established at the London Conference.

We hope this meeting will build on the success of that Conference. We go to Qatar to maintain the international pressure on the Qadhafi regime, to reaffirm the strength and determination of the broad international coalition, and to make further progress in planning for vital humanitarian and stabilisation support, and long term political support. The Interim National Council, which will be present at part of that meeting, will be able to set out more of their thinking about a political process that achieves a free and democratic future for the people of Libya. It's a process that has to be owned and led by the people of Libya themselves, and they will have our full support as they do so.

I am delighted that Italy has announced that it will host the next meeting of the Contact Group."

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