

Speech: Call to Stop the Devastation Facing the People of Eastern Ghouta

Thank you Mr President, and thank you also to Under Secretary General Lowcock for your very detailed and clear briefing today. It was very powerful to hear through you the voices of the people of Eastern Ghouta.

Mr President,

Russia called this meeting today to allow us to present our understanding of the situation on the ground and to come up with ways of getting out of this situation. Well, we've heard very clearly from Under Secretary General Lowcock today and from the Secretary General yesterday about the situation on the ground.

This is hell on earth.

The scale of the human suffering and destruction is unbearable.

The suffering of the Syrian people, while primarily the responsibility of the Syrian regime, brings shame on all of us in this Council.

Let us be very clear about the main cause of this hell on earth. It's the direct result of an escalation by the Syrian regime of its aerial bombardment of civilian areas using cluster bombs, alleged chemical weapons use and systematically killing hundreds of its own civilians.

As others in this chamber have said today, these are breaches of international humanitarian law and are war crimes.

The UK will be unrelenting in our campaign to ensure accountability and justice for these crimes using all mechanisms at our disposal.

Mr President,

We owe it to the people of Eastern Ghouta to highlight the utter devastation facing them and then to take measures to stop it.

According to the Syrian American Medical Society, in the first 48 hours of this week, 250 civilians have been killed and 460 injured. Those that survived these attacks have been further targeted by the regime whilst trying to get help for their injuries. There have been 22 separate attacks on 20 different hospitals in the three days since Monday. We applaud the incredible work of the brave doctors on the ground who risk their own lives to save others. And like the Netherlands, we salute the heroes of the White Helmets who have demonstrated incredible bravery, courage and resilience to save the lives of thousands of Syrians from all sides of this conflict.

From the start of this conflict the Assad regime has peddled the myth that all of those opposing Assad are terrorists. This is manifestly not the case.

The people of Eastern Ghouta are not terrorists. Jabhat al-Nusra have only a small presence in Eastern Ghouta; their fighters numbering less than a quarter of one percent of the population of that area. Nothing can justify the barbaric bombardment we've seen in recent days, or the blocking of humanitarian aid, or the denial of medical evacuations.

We also condemn the mortar shelling from Eastern Ghouta of civilian areas of Damascus and attacks against the Russian Embassy in Damascus.

Mr President,

This Council has failed to uphold its responsibilities in Syria. We all know why this is. But we have all agreed that there can be no military solution to the conflict, only a political one. The actions of the Assad regime in recent weeks, the military escalation in an area guaranteed by Russia and Iran as a "de-escalation zone" shows cynical disregard by the regime for every member of this Council and for our resolution. So it is vital that we all send a clear and unified message in response.

The solution to this situation is not difficult. We need to see an immediate cessation of hostilities, including an immediate end to the aerial bombing of Eastern Ghouta. If everyone in this chamber were to commit to this unequivocally today, it could have an impact on the ground. It could save the lives of thousands of innocent men, women and children who are being killed as we speak here today in this chamber. We therefore welcome the resolution put forward into blue by you, Mr President, and by Sweden, and we look forward to a vote later today.

To conclude Mr President,

Yesterday, we discussed the principles of the UN Charter which our predecessors drafted in the name of the peoples of the world to help save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. It's clear we have fallen woefully short of this aim. We have failed the people of Eastern Ghouta. But let us reverse this trend today. Let us adopt your draft resolution and take the concrete actions needed to ease the suffering in this zone of death and destruction.

Thank you.