

Statement to Parliament: PM Commons Statement on Salisbury incident response: 14 March 2018

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a Statement on the response of the Russian government to the incident in Salisbury.

First, on behalf of the whole House, let me pay tribute once again to the bravery and professionalism of all the emergency services, doctors, nurses and investigation teams who have led the response to this appalling incident.

And also to the fortitude of the people of Salisbury. Let me reassure them that – as Public Health England have made clear – the ongoing risk to public health is low. And the government will continue to do everything possible to support this historic city to recover fully.

Mr Speaker, on Monday I set out that Mr Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with a Novichok: a military grade nerve agent developed by Russia.

Based on this capability, combined with their record of conducting state sponsored assassinations – including against former intelligence officers whom they regard as legitimate targets – the UK government concluded it was highly likely that Russia was responsible for this reckless and despicable act.

And there were only two plausible explanations.

Either this was a direct act by the Russian State against our country.

Or conceivably, the Russian government could have lost control of a military-grade nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.

Mr Speaker, it was right to offer Russia the opportunity to provide an explanation.

But their response has demonstrated complete disdain for the gravity of these events.

They have provided no credible explanation that could suggest they lost control of their nerve agent.

No explanation as to how this agent came to be used in the United Kingdom; no explanation as to why Russia has an undeclared chemical weapons programme in contravention of international law.

Instead they have treated the use of a military grade nerve agent in Europe with sarcasm, contempt and defiance.

So Mr Speaker, there is no alternative conclusion other than that the Russian

State was culpable for the attempted murder of Mr Skripal and his daughter – and for threatening the lives of other British citizens in Salisbury, including Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey.

This represents an unlawful use of force by the Russian State against the United Kingdom.

And as I set out on Monday it has taken place against the backdrop of a well-established pattern of Russian State aggression across Europe and beyond.

It must therefore be met with a full and robust response – beyond the actions we have already taken since the murder of Mr Litvinenko and to counter this pattern of Russian aggression elsewhere.

As the discussion in this House on Monday made clear, it is essential that we now come together – with our allies – to defend our security, to stand up for our values and to send a clear message to those who would seek to undermine them.

This morning I chaired a further meeting of the National Security Council, where we agreed immediate actions to dismantle the Russian espionage network in the UK, urgent work to develop new powers to tackle all forms of hostile state activity and to ensure that those seeking to carry out such activity cannot enter the UK, and additional steps to suspend all planned high-level contacts between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.

Let me start with the immediate actions.

Mr Speaker, the House will recall that following the murder of Mr Litvinenko, the UK expelled four diplomats.

Under the Vienna Convention, the United Kingdom will now expel 23 Russian diplomats who have been identified as undeclared intelligence officers.

They have just one week to leave.

This will be the single biggest expulsion for over thirty years and it reflects the fact that this is not the first time that the Russian State has acted against our country.

Through these expulsions we will fundamentally degrade Russian intelligence capability in the UK for years to come. And if they seek to rebuild it, we will prevent them from doing so.

Second, we will urgently develop proposals for new legislative powers to harden our defences against all forms of Hostile State Activity.

This will include the addition of a targeted power to detain those suspected of Hostile State Activity at the UK border. This power is currently only permitted in relation to those suspected of terrorism.

And I have asked the Home Secretary to consider whether there is a need for new counter-espionage powers to clamp down on the full spectrum of hostile

activities of foreign agents in our country.

Mr Speaker, as I set out on Monday we will also table a government amendment to the Sanctions Bill to strengthen our powers to impose sanctions in response to the violation of human rights.

In doing so, we will play our part in an international effort to punish those responsible for the sorts of abuses suffered by Sergey Magnitsky.

And I hope – as with all the measures I am setting out today – that this will command cross-party support.

Mr Speaker, we will also make full use of existing powers to enhance our efforts to monitor and track the intentions of those travelling to the UK who could be engaged in activity that threatens the security of the UK and of our allies.

So we will increase checks on private flights, customs and freight.

We will freeze Russian State assets wherever we have the evidence that they may be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals or residents.

And led by the National Crime Agency, we will continue to bring all the capabilities of UK law enforcement to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. There is no place for these people – or their money – in our country.

Mr Speaker, let me be clear.

While our response must be robust it must also remain true to our values – as a liberal democracy that believes in the rule of law.

Many Russians have made this country their home, abide by our laws and make an important contribution to our country which we must continue to welcome.

But to those who seek to do us harm, my message is simple: you are not welcome here.

Mr Speaker, let me turn to our bi-lateral relationship.

As I said on Monday, we have had a very simple approach to Russia: engage but beware.

And I continue to believe it is not in our national interest to break off all dialogue between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.

But in the aftermath of this appalling act against our country, this relationship cannot be the same.

So we will suspend all planned high level bi-lateral contacts between the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.

This includes revoking the invitation to Foreign Minister Lavrov to pay a reciprocal visit to the United Kingdom and confirming there will be no

attendance by Ministers – or indeed Members of the Royal Family – at this Summer's World Cup in Russia.

Finally, Mr Speaker, we will deploy a range of tools from across the full breadth of our National Security apparatus in order to counter the threats of Hostile State Activity.

While I have set out some of those measures today, Members on all sides will understand that there are some that cannot be shared publicly for reasons of National Security.

And, of course, there are other measures we stand ready to deploy at any time, should we face further Russian provocation.

Mr Speaker, none of the actions we take are intended to damage legitimate activity or prevent contacts between our populations.

We have no disagreement with the people of Russia who have been responsible for so many great achievements throughout their history.

Many of us looked at a post-Soviet Russia with hope. We wanted a better relationship and it is tragic that President Putin has chosen to act in this way.

But we will not tolerate the threat to life of British people and others on British soil from the Russian government. Nor will we tolerate such a flagrant breach of Russia's international obligations.

Mr Speaker, as I set out on Monday, the United Kingdom does not stand alone in confronting Russian aggression.

In the last twenty-four hours I have spoken to President Trump, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron.

We have agreed to co-operate closely in responding to this barbaric act and to co-ordinate our efforts to stand up for the rules based international order which Russia seeks to undermine.

I will also speak to other allies and partners in the coming days.

And I welcome the strong expressions of support from NATO and from partners across the European Union and beyond.

Later today in New York, the UN Security Council will hold open consultations where we will be pushing for a robust international response.

We have also notified the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons about Russia's use of this nerve agent. And we are working with the police to enable the OPCW to independently verify our analysis.

Mr Speaker, this was not just an act of attempted murder in Salisbury – nor just an act against UK.

It is an affront to the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons.

And it is an affront to the rules based system on which we and our international partners depend.

We will work with our allies and partners to confront such actions wherever they threaten our security, at home and abroad.

And I commend this Statement to the House.