

Statement to Parliament: Syria update: Penny Mordaunt statement to Parliament

Mr Speaker, I would like to get on record that the aid workers who have been attacked in South Sudan are very much in our thoughts. Aid workers should never be a target. The whole house will want to join me in sending our support to them and to their families.

Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the United Kingdom's support for the people of Syria. I am keenly aware that Honourable Members are deeply concerned about the level of suffering experienced by millions of Syrians. The United Kingdom has shown, and will continue to show, leadership in the international humanitarian response.

In the eighth year of the conflict the plight of the Syrian people remains grave. The Syrian regime appears to have no intention of ending the suffering of its own people, despite the opposition placing no conditions on peace negotiations.

The barbaric attack in Douma on innocent civilians, including young children, was yet another example of the regime's disregard for its responsibility to protect civilians. Some may seek to cast doubt over the attack and who was responsible, but intelligence and first-hand accounts from NGOs and aid workers are clear: the World Health Organisation received reports that hundreds of patients arrived at Syrian health facilities on the night of 7 April with "signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals."

Regime helicopters were seen over Douma on that evening: the Opposition does not operate helicopters or use barrel bombs.

Asad and his backers, Russia and Iran, will attempt to block every diplomatic effort to hold the Regime accountable for these reprehensible and illegal tactics. That is why the United Kingdom, together with our US and French allies took co-ordinated, limited and targeted action against the Regime's chemical weapons' capabilities to alleviate humanitarian suffering.

Britain is clear: we must defend the global rules based system that keeps all of us safe. And I welcome the support we have had from members of this house and from the international community.

We will work with the UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to create a new independent mechanism to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks.

We will work with France on the International Partnership against Impunity, and with the EU to establish a new sanctions regime against those responsible for chemical weapons use.

In wielding its UN veto twelve times, Russia has given a green light to Asad to perpetrate human rights atrocities against his own people – a regime that

has used nearly seventy thousand barrel bombs on civilian targets.

A regime that tries to starve its people into submission, despite the UN Security Council calling for unhindered humanitarian access.

A regime that has continued to obstruct aid to Eastern Ghouta and removes medical supplies from the rare aid convoys that do get in.

A regime that deploys rape as a weapon of war, with nearly eight out of ten people detained by the regime reported to have suffered sexual violence.

A regime that deliberately bombs schools and hospitals, and targets aid workers and emergency responders as they race to the scene to help.

We must support the innocent victims of these atrocities. All warring parties must comply with the Geneva Conventions on the protected status of civilians and other non-combatants. There must be an immediate ceasefire and safe access for aid workers and medical staff to do their job.

We also want to adapt what we do to the new reality of this war. That is why I have announced the new 'Creating Hope in Conflict' fund with USAID to work with the private sector to find new technology to save lives in conflict zones, and Britain will establish a humanitarian innovation hub to develop new capabilities to hinder regimes who appear determined to slay innocent men women and children.

Our aid has made a difference. Despite the horrific violence meted out by Assad, we have been able to prevent mass starvation, and large scale disease outbreaks. When we are able to reach people who need our help, our aid works.

We are the second largest bilateral donor to the humanitarian response in Syria. Since 2012, our support has provided over 22 million monthly food rations, almost 10 million medical consultations, and over 9 million relief packages.

But the suffering continues.

13.1 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance. Over half of Syria's population has been displaced by violence, with nearly 6 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries.

In north-west Syria, an intensification of hostilities and the arrival of an additional 60,000 people from Eastern Ghouta is stretching scarce resources. Today, 65% of the population of Idleb – over 1.2 million people – have been forced from their homes.

At last week's Conference ["Supporting the future of Syria and the Region" in Brussels], I announced that the UK will provide at least £450 million this year, and £300 million next year to alleviate the extreme suffering in Syria and provide vital support in neighbouring countries. This will be in addition to our support for the second EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey. We have now committed £2.71 billion since 2012, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

Our pledge will help keep medical facilities open to save lives. We will deploy protective equipment to keep medics and rescue workers safe. We will deploy antidote stocks to treat any further victims of chemical weapons use. We will train doctors and nurses to treat trauma wounds.

We will focus on education, making sure that every child in the region has access to quality education even in the most trying of circumstances; and on steps to protect civilians and ensure that those responsible for attacks will face justice. And we will help support the millions of Syrian refugees sheltering in neighbouring countries.

Our friends in the region, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in particular, continue to demonstrate extraordinary generosity in opening their doors to millions fleeing the conflict in Syria.

We must continue to offer them our fullest support. Last week I announced that the UK will host an international conference with Jordan in London later this year. It will showcase Jordan's economic reform plans, its aspiration to build a thriving private sector, and mobilise international investment.

There are refugees who can't be supported in the region: people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk of exploitation. We will work closely with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to identify those most at risk and bring them to the UK.

We are helping. But, with Russian support, Asad continues to bomb his own people – that is why so many continue to die and so many have fled their homes.

There can be no military solution to the Syrian civil war. As UN Special Representative, Staffan de Mistura, said in Brussels last week, the Asad regime risks a pyrrhic victory unless they and their backers engage in a genuine political process. Only this can deliver reconciliation and the restoration of Syria as a prosperous, secure and stable state.

The UK will continue to support the efforts of the UN, under the Geneva process, to this end. The obstacles remain serious – the regime has shown no inclination to engage seriously so far, and the Security Council remains divided.

But the international community cannot and should not resign themselves to failure. The costs for Syria, for the region, and for the wider international rules based system are too great. The Foreign Secretary was in Paris last Thursday to discuss with key partners how we should intensify our efforts to bring this conflict – and its causes – to an end.

Whilst we actively work to find a political solution, the UK will continue to stand alongside the people of Syria and the region; to do what we can to alleviate human suffering; and to demand immediate access for aid workers to all those who need our help.

I commend this statement to the house.