

Syria

Question for Short Debate

8.32 pm

Asked by The Lord Bishop of Coventry

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to address the humanitarian crisis caused by the ongoing conflict in Syria.

The Lord Bishop of Coventry: My Lords, despite the admirable diplomatic activity of recent weeks, the humanitarian costs of the ongoing conflict in Syria show no sign of abatement. As violence expands exponentially and cruelty abounds, no one can fail to be moved by the scale of the crisis, which is nothing short of a catastrophe.

This debate seeks neither to underestimate the efforts of Her Majesty's Government to rise to the challenge of humanitarian support, nor to question their resolve to work towards a political resolution of the civil war. Rather, I hope that it will give an opportunity for your Lordships' House to focus its expert attention on the humanitarian costs of the conflict and the humanitarian imperative of bringing the conflict to an end, and, in so doing, of checking that every stone is being turned in the cause of compassion and the pursuit of peace.

I am honoured that the noble Lord, Lord Bates, whose personal commitment to these issues is an inspiration to your Lordships' House, will be replying on behalf of the Government. The Government are to be applauded for orchestrating the UK's largest ever response to a humanitarian crisis. The United Kingdom is at the forefront of the humanitarian battle, leading others in the provision of strategic, targeted humanitarian aid. Such decisive, compassionate action is an important step towards healing the wounds of history that many of our past interventions in the Middle East have caused, which were powerfully explained by the noble Lord, Lord Bates, in a previous debate.

However, are we content that the humanitarian battle is being fought with the ferocity, skill, determination, sense of urgency and application of resource that are necessary in order to win this war on human suffering? I ask the Minister, therefore, for his views on how other Governments can be most effectively pressed to commit to the pledging conference that the United Nations Secretary-General has called in January 2014, and then to fully and speedily honour their commitments? Syria needs more than the current 50% return. The cost of the humanitarian aid to which we are committed is high, but it is a great deal lower than the cost of military intervention would have been.

Does the noble Lord agree that without more international generosity and a greater commitment to honour their promises of support, countries neighbouring Syria will be less inclined to keep their borders open? Indeed, I would welcome the noble Lord's thoughts on what consideration has been given to the UK hosting or resettling a fair percentage of refugees to ease the pressure on Syria's neighbouring countries, as requested by the UNHCR.

Returning to the January pledging conference, do Her Majesty's Government accept that as well as increasing their funding commitments, donors must show greater flexibility and impose minimal bureaucratic restrictions on aid agencies, given the complexity of humanitarian operations inside Syria?

If you had one word for the British Government, what would it be? I put that question to a Lebanese humanitarian worker among Syrian refugees recently. His response was an impassioned call to invest—a word he used advisedly—our aid through locally based bodies whose scale and agility give them immediate access to need on the ground that makes them highly cost effective. It is a plea that I have heard from other agencies, several of them faith-based, which are doing remarkable work in Syria and surrounding countries.

I should like to pay tribute to those agencies that remain on the ground in Syria. I have just attended a meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights which was addressed by members of the International Committee of the Red Cross. They spoke movingly about all sorts of subjects, including the kidnapping of three of their aid workers and the recent killing of more than 20 Red Crescent workers.

Yet they are committed to remaining on the ground, engaged and seeking local solutions. It would be good to learn from the noble Lord what percentage of UK effort is directed to meeting emergency needs, and what percentage is earmarked for long-term humanitarian assistance.

The other impassioned word from the Lebanese humanitarian worker was that, without a comprehensive solution to the humanitarian situation in Syria, and to the conflict itself, the wider region will continue to deteriorate. The United Nations Security Council endorsement of Resolution 2118 of the Geneva Communiqué and the backing for a follow-up conference provides a much-needed consensus among the P5. Such impetus for a political solution is necessary to prevent the fossilisation of systems of aid into semi-permanent structures. We know, from that same region, that this can happen.

In the light of recent announcements from some elements of the Syrian opposition, it would be helpful to hear the views of the noble Lord on how the will for peace, upon which the success of Geneva II depends, can be engendered in the country itself. Securing a sustained and monitored cessation of hostilities in Syria, as set out in paragraph 5 of the original Geneva Communiqué, will not be easy. However, a ceasefire is essential to improve the humanitarian situation and to allow, at the very

least, a short humanitarian pause in hostilities. Furthermore, surely a complete and immediate halt to arms and ammunition to Syria, as set out in paragraph 12 of the Geneva Communiqué, is another necessary component in the cause of peace. I would welcome the noble Lord's reflections on steps that are being taken to halt the flow of arms into Syria.

The noble Lord is all too well aware that paragraph 5 of the Geneva Communiqué was given a renewed lease of life by the recent UN Security Council Presidential Statement. Parties to the conflict are still failing to uphold the basic obligation, under international humanitarian law, to facilitate the safe, unhindered passage of humanitarian convoys in areas under their control. In the light of the penetrating comments from the noble Baroness, Lady Amos, in her United Nations capacity to the Security Council, it would be good to know the noble Lord's views on progress towards implementing this provision and how it might be benchmarked.

At the meeting I have just come from, there was a very moving account from a British doctor who has just returned from Aleppo. He spoke about how access for humanitarian aid is absolutely critical. He asked: if it could be done for a weapons' inspector, why could it not be done for an ambulance?

One issue sadly missing from the guiding principles of the Geneva Communiqué is any consideration of the wider refugee crisis and how the right of return will be provided for. This appears to be a glaring omission. Those displaced by the conflict need to be given a stake in Syria's future. Perhaps the noble Lord will provide some insight into how this issue might be resolved.

In conclusion, if the existing humanitarian costs of this conflict are shamefully terrifying, the humanitarian costs of not reaching a political settlement at Geneva II would surely be intolerable for the moral conscience of the world. Even with a political solution, the scars of this conflict will take many generations to heal. It will require the continued generosity of the international community in a sustained and strategic humanitarian commitment. I hope that Her Majesty's Government will continue to take a courageous lead and make this not the last business of a long day but the priority of every morning until the holy land of Syria is healed.