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Secretary of State

9 March 2016

Stephen Twigg MP
Chair of the International Development Committee
House of Commons
London
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Dear Stephen

The Secretary of State for International Development (DFID) has asked me to respond to your letter of 2 February as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is the lead Department for the issues you raise. I welcome this opportunity to respond to the International Development Committee's recommendations.

The situation in Yemen remains of deep concern to the UK Government, in particular the dire humanitarian crisis. We all agree on the need for urgent action to prevent a further deterioration and to provide life-saving assistance to the Yemeni population. As you recognise, the UK has played a leadership role on this, in particular with regards to humanitarian and commercial shipping access to all of Yemen's sea ports. The FCO, DFID and the Ministry of Defence will continue to work closely together to improve the humanitarian situation and support peace and stability in Yemen.

Regarding your first recommendation, the Government is not opposing calls for an independent investigation but, first and foremost, we want to see the Saudis investigate allegations of breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) which are attributed to them; and for their investigations to be thorough and conclusive. The Saudi authorities announced more detail of how they will investigate such incidents on 31 January, including a new investigation team outside of Coalition Command to review all existing procedures, and suggest improvements. We believe we should give time for this new team to do its job before considering the issue of an independent investigation.

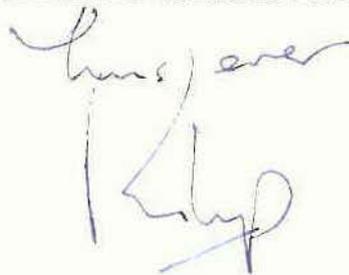
It is untrue that the UK was "not satisfied" with the proposals in the Human Rights Council resolution tabled by the Netherlands and sought to water them down. The two sides which tabled different resolutions at the September/October 2015 Human Rights Council reached an agreement on a single text, which was then adopted by consensus. The UK supports this outcome as it is designed to help the legitimate Government of Yemen (GoY) improve its own capacity to protect the human rights of its people. The UN Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights will provide an oral update on developments on Yemen at the next Human Rights Council session in March. We will take into consideration the assessment given and the recommendations made.

Regarding your second recommendation, we can and do respond quickly and flexibly to changing or fluid circumstances, and are able to review licences and suspend or revoke when required. On the basis of the information currently available to us, we are satisfied that all extant UK licences for the export of arms to Saudi Arabia are compliant with the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria. Criterion 2c provides that a licence must be refused if “there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of IHL”. All available relevant information, including UK, US and Saudi reporting as well as open source reporting by the media and NGOs, is taken into account as part of the assessment and this is kept under regular review, with new information factored in as we receive it. We monitor the situation very closely and seek further information where appropriate to inform our overall risk assessment.

Regarding your third recommendation, I agree with you on the importance of putting pressure on all parties to the conflict and other international actors to comply with their obligations under international law and to take all possible measures to protect civilians. Allowing humanitarian agencies a safe space in which to operate is a top priority, and requires the resumption of peace talks alongside work towards a durable ceasefire. The UK is working closely with the UN, the Coalition and the GoY on the peace talks. We regularly raise the importance of compliance with IHL with the Saudi Government and other members of the military coalition and continue to engage with them on this. We also have raised our concerns with the Houthis on the importance of compliance with IHL. We continue to call on all parties to facilitate rapid and safe access to all people in need, to safeguard major access routes and key infrastructure in Yemen, including airports, sea ports, fuel distribution sites, and to protect civilians.

The UK is the fourth largest donor to this crisis, having more than doubled our humanitarian aid to Yemen this year to £85m for 2015/16. We have helped more than 1.3 million Yemenis, providing life-saving assistance such as medical supplies, water, food and emergency shelter, as well as supporting refugees and migrants. The latest £10m will include additional support for food, water and healthcare, and contribute to the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism. Our support is delivered through the UN (UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR, OCHA) and through international organisations and NGOs (e.g. Oxfam, Save the Children, CARE, International Organisation for Migration).

We continue to urge all parties to engage in good faith in peace talks, which are vital to achieving the sustainable political solution that Yemen desperately needs to resolve the crisis and improve the humanitarian situation.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Philip Hammond', is written over a faint, larger signature that is partially obscured.

THE RT HON PHILIP HAMMOND MP