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# Statement by Minister Flanagan to Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence

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[Speech](#)

Minister Charles Flanagan TD - 25/5/17

**Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence**

**25 May 2017**

**Foreign Affairs Council**

**Statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs & Trade, Mr. Charlie Flanagan, T.D.**

## **CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to address you on developments at the EU Foreign Affairs Council. My Department has provided a detailed advance information note to the Joint Committee and in the interests of maximising the time available for questions and discussion, I propose to confine my opening remarks to a few of the major themes.

### **Syria**

In terms of violence and displacement of civilians the conflict in Syria remains the most pressing problem in our neighbourhood and one of the most intractable and difficult to address. The EU has remained actively engaged, but there is also significant involvement by regional players and great powers.

The UN is playing an important leadership role, and there are going on at the moment what might be called punctuated talks processes in Geneva and latterly in Astana. The conflict is extremely complex. In EU discussions, Ireland has sought to stress the primacy of a political resolution over any drift into a purely military approach, the paramount issue of bringing the fighting and destruction to an end, and the urgency in the meantime of humanitarian access and relief.

In April the Council adopted Conclusions on an EU Strategy for Syria, which reflected these priorities. Ireland has backed up these views by contributing very substantial humanitarian assistance to help the victims of the conflict, amounting now to €76.5 million.

Absent agreement in the Security Council, Ireland supported the establishment of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism on Syria. I have recently announced an initial contribution of €100,000 towards the costs of the Mechanism.

### **Yemen**

The Council also discussed the situation in Yemen in April. Ireland's primary concern in Yemen is the humanitarian situation, which is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world.

I have discussed this with my counterparts in the Gulf region, calling on them to use their influence to encourage the warring parties to lay down arms. Minister of State McHugh made a similar call at a recent conference on Yemen in Geneva.

I have made clear in this House and elsewhere my absolute condemnation of the reported deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure by both sides to the conflict.

When I met with my counterparts from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, I raised Ireland's concerns about attacks which have directly impacted on civilians.

Ireland has been supportive of calls for an independent, international investigation into alleged violations of international humanitarian law in Yemen, and my Department will continue to support calls for all alleged violations of human rights and international humanitarian law to be fully investigated, and for those found guilty of violations to be held accountable.

I commend the efforts of UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh [*Sheikh*] Ahmed and his team, who continue to work tirelessly for peace. I urge all parties to this conflict, as well as those with influence in the region, to accept the Special Envoy's invitation to return to the negotiating table for a peace settlement.

## **MEPP**

The FAC considered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in March. My strong support for the French Initiative last year, which concluded in the Paris Conference in January, was based on my deep concern that the other crises in the region have distracted international attention away from this long standing problem.

This is especially so now, as we reach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Israeli occupation, and negative actions on the ground increase tension and the risk of renewed violence.

The French Initiative did refocus international attention to an extent, and restate the broad support for the two state solution, but agreement on the way forward did not emerge. The advent of a new US Administration is always something of a watershed in regard to the Middle East Peace Process.

The visit of President Trump to the region earlier this week showed his interest, at least, in bringing the parties together in renewed negotiations, and he urged the parties to engage positively with each other. Any specific US plan to follow up on this will emerge over time.

## **Ukraine**

Discussion on Ukraine at the February FAC focusing on the country's reform process was overshadowed by the worrying security situation in eastern Ukraine, following a significant escalation in fighting at the end of January. Ministers expressed concern at the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Donbas, and underlined the need for full implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

At a meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Klimkin in advance of the FAC last week, I expressed my concerns at the fragile security situation, the heavy costs being borne by the local civilian populations and the increasingly dangerous environment in which OSCE Special Monitoring Mission members are operating.

I joined others in commending the government of Ukraine on the progress it has made so far and strongly supporting continued reform efforts. I also expressed the hope that the entry into force of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine and visa liberalisation for Ukrainian citizens in the Schengen area would soon be a reality. I firmly believe that reaching these milestones will send an important signal to Ukrainian citizens that the national reform effort is delivering positive benefits.

## **Migration**

While migration may have largely faded from the media headlines, the terrible drownings that we see in the Mediterranean are a stark reminder of the human costs of the crisis.

A range of measures adopted by the EU have resulted in a significant reduction in the number of people risking their lives at sea on the Eastern Mediterranean migration route from Turkey. However, migration has increased on the Central Mediterranean Route from Libya to Italy. The EU has been helping Libya to deal with traffickers using Libya as a platform for irregular migration. Ireland's navy has been dealing with the consequences of those callous activities rescuing over 15,600 people to date, and I commend their brave work.

Ireland continues to maintain that the EU's approach to the migration crisis must be based on solidarity and must address the root causes as well as the humanitarian challenges.

This was one of the main reason Ireland voluntarily opted into EU relocation and resettlement plans in 2015. And that is why we continue to support the EU's Migration Partnership Framework agreed last year. At its heart is working with countries of origin and transit in Sub-Saharan Africa to help address their particular circumstances.

We have been working closely with Ethiopia, one of Irish Aid's partner countries. Migration will continue to be a priority issue for the EU and will likely be discussed at our June meeting, ahead of discussions at the June European Council.

## **Turkey**

Following the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016, the constitutional referendum passed there on 16 April has kept an international focus on the ongoing negative developments there. The amendments, once implemented, will invest considerable powers in the Office of President and may erode the checks and balances necessary in a democracy.

EU Ministers agreed that it is essential to keep the lines of communication with Turkey open; that our discussions must be open and frank, but conducted with mutual respect; that the door to the accession process should remain open, but that, if there is to be progress along this path, Turkey will be held fully accountable for its commitment to act in accordance with European values on human rights, democracy, rule of law and freedom of expression, including media freedom. The situation is complicated, and difficult and will remain on our agenda.

I had the opportunity to convey Ireland's concerns directly to the Turkish Minister of the Economy when he led a trade delegation to Ireland in April. I expressed my serious concerns about the direction of travel in Turkey and emphasised that, while we do not underestimate the impact of both the attempted coup and the many terrorist attacks suffered by Turkey, we remain deeply concerned at the ongoing detentions and dismissals, and other restrictions on human rights and basic freedoms, including freedom of expression and media freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

In that context, I reiterated that the introduction of the death penalty would be unacceptable.

I know that the Committee met last week with representatives of the pro-Kurdish HDP, and I would like to repeat that I have consistently made clear that the rights of the Kurdish population in Turkey must be respected – a point I made again at the recent Gymnich informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers in April.

We have also made clear that we regret the breakdown of the ceasefire between the

Turkish Government and the PKK in July 2015, and that we have repeatedly called for a return to political dialogue so that a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish issue can be reached.

## **EU Global Strategy**

As well as the immediate issues, the FAC has been considering how the EU can redouble its efforts to promote a rules-based international order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core.

The EU Global Strategy sets out a vision for foreign and security policy. It commits the Union to promoting peace, prosperity, democracy and the rule of law. The Strategy recognises the need to invest more in conflict resolution and tackle the root causes of instability, using a mix of policies coherently to support international peace, economic development and to help build state and societal capacity on governance, rule of law and human rights. Strengthening the EU's peacekeeping capacity in support of the United Nations will be an integral part of this effort. This will be done through the further development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as defined in the EU Treaties.

Civilian CSDP Missions promote stability and build resilience in fragile environments through strengthening rule of law institutions. They work to link up the three essential elements of the EU's integrated approach as outlined in the EU Global Strategy – diplomacy, security and defence and development.

There are currently nine civilian missions on two continents with about 2,500 staff deployed to them. Ireland currently deploys twelve civilians and five members of An Garda Síochána to eight of those Missions.

In Ukraine, where there are two Irish nationals deployed, the EU Assistance Mission (EUAM Ukraine) has been providing support to the Ukrainian authorities to establish a civilian security sector that is efficient, accountable, and enjoys the trust of the public.

In Georgia, where two Irish nationals are also deployed, the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM Georgia) seeks to ensure that there is no return to hostilities with Russia and to facilitate the resumption of a safe and normal life for the local communities living on both sides of the Administrative Boundary Lines with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Discussions at the FAC have centred on a number of proposals geared towards making CSDP more effective. This includes adapting civilian CSDP to make it more operational and responsive in the face of new and existing security challenges; improving CSDP crisis management structures; and strengthening CSDP cooperation with partner countries and organisations including the United Nations.

It also includes the development of voluntary initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and a Coordinated Annual Review on Defence which are aimed at providing more efficiently the capabilities required for international peace support.

Ireland has actively contributed to the development of these concepts with a view to ensuring that they add value to the CSDP and the EU's international crisis management efforts, grounded in the EU Treaties and related protocols. We strongly support initiatives, through the CSDP, which improve the capacity of the Union to contribute to international peace and stability, particularly in support of the UN.

## **Look ahead**

Looking ahead to the next meeting in June, the Council will continue its work on the implementation of the EU Global Strategy, as well as discussing migration, Iraq and the Sahel.

Chairman, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for your time and your patience in allowing me to review what I think you will agree has been a diverse agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council. I would be happy to address any questions you may have and look forward to hearing your own perspectives on these issues.

**ENDS**