

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

**4 May 2021**

### **Opening Statement by the Minister**

Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to meet with you.

Given the large number of items discussed at FAC since we last met in October, and at the Security Council since January, I will only address selected issues in my opening remarks. I will be happy, of course, to answer questions during the Q&A.

#### **UNSC Overview**

We have had a busy first four months on the UN Security Council since joining in January.

From rapidly evolving crises in Myanmar and Ethiopia, to the challenging situations in Syria, Yemen, Libya and the Middle East Peace Process, we have been actively engaged, bringing our views and perspectives, and seeking to make a difference. The same goes for thematic issues, such as Climate and Security; Women, Peace and Security; and Hunger and Conflict.

This is what we were elected to do.

## **Middles East Issues and Peacekeeping**

As part of our work as Council co-penholder on the humanitarian situation in **Syria**, I visited Turkey in January. I saw first-hand the vital role the UN-authorized cross border humanitarian assistance operation plays in meeting the needs of Syrians. I also discussed wider regional issues with the Turkish Foreign Minister. We have a significant task ahead of us in the next few months as we prepare for the renewal of the mandate for that cross-border operation. 2.7 million vulnerable Syrians around the Idlib area are reliant on the humanitarian aid that comes through the Bab Al Hawa crossing. This is a top priority for me personally and for my Department.

In our role as Security Council Facilitator on the **Iran** nuclear agreement, last month I visited Iran to discuss the JCPOA with President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif. I encouraged Minister Zarif to come to the table with the JCPOA participants and start serious discussions on how to get the agreement back on track, including suggesting that he consider proximity talks. Three weeks after my visit, Iran accepted an invitation by the EU for proximity talks in Vienna. There is some way to go, but I am encouraged by progress to date. I've also been clear, however, that Iran's recent proliferation activities are deeply concerning. I have called on Iran to comply with its obligations under the JCPOA.

The **Middle East Peace Process** continues to be a priority for Ireland. We have been actively engaged at both the FAC and the UN Security Council. At the quarterly open debate on the Middle East Peace Process at the UN Security Council in January, I underlined my clear view that a two-state solution is the only basis for a just and lasting peace. In April, Ireland delivered a statement on behalf of five current and recent EU members of the Security Council.

We encouraged the completion of free, fair and inclusive elections across the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and called on Israel to facilitate elections and international monitoring. I am very disappointed by the decision taken on 29 April to postpone the elections. I encourage the Palestinian Authority to set a new date immediately, and urge Israel to cooperate in facilitating voting, including in East Jerusalem.

Since I last met with you, the process to end the brutal civil war in **Libya** has moved remarkably quickly. I welcomed the adoption in April of a UN Security Council resolution, supporting a new Libyan Ceasefire Monitoring Mechanism. The EU has effectively used the tool of sanctions to support this progress. We have rewarded constructive engagement by easing sanctions. We have expedited sanctions against those who defy the UN arms embargo and are accused of mass killings. The EU's Operation IRINI continues to play an important role in upholding the UN arms embargo. And, as you know, three Defence Forces personnel are based at the Operation's HQ.

I know that the members of this Committee share a sense of pride in our Defence Forces and their unbroken record of contributing to UN **peacekeeping**. We are using the day to day experiences of our Defence Forces personnel to seek to improve peacekeeping mandates, as they come up for renewal.

### **Africa and Asia**

Ireland has strong ties in Africa and we have been working closely with our African partners on the UN Security Council. Since we last met, conflict has broken out in Tigray, **Ethiopia**. More than five months on, the humanitarian situation remains dire, and there are credible - and harrowing - reports of widespread sexual violence against women and girls.

These atrocities must cease, and perpetrators must be held to account. Ireland has been at the forefront of efforts to address the situation - in both the FAC and the Security Council. In April, we led the negotiation of a Security Council press statement. This was the first Council statement on the crisis, and we will continue to use our Council membership to highlight the need to protect civilians and ensure unfettered humanitarian access.

The instigation of a military coup in **Myanmar**, involving serious violence and ongoing repression, is another major development of concern since our last meeting. This crisis has been discussed at FAC on three occasions. EU sanctions have been adopted against individuals and economic entities. I welcome also that the UN Security Council has maintained a united stance.

### **Human Rights and Sanctions**

Promoting Human Rights is a priority for Ireland's UN Security Council term, and our ongoing contribution to EU policy formation at FAC. In December, the FAC established the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. This regime seeks to target serious human rights violations and abuses, wherever they may occur. To date, we have agreed to impose sanctions on 15 individuals and entities from six different countries.

### **Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods**

Sanctions have been just one element of the EU response to a series of recent destabilising developments in its Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods.

The EU's relationship with **Russia** has been discussed on multiple occasions in recent months at FAC. We have seen little indication of a willingness on the part of Russia to improve relations. Our extensive FAC discussion in February focused on the High Representative's visit to Moscow, and we imposed sanctions on those responsible for the persecution of Alexei Navalny.

We have agreed that progress in addressing the situation in Ukraine remains the key condition for any substantial change in EU-Russia relations. The FAC met with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister in April, and I underlined our full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The FAC considered EU-Turkey relations in March. During this discussion, and during my visit to **Turkey**, I made clear that Ireland is in favour of developing a more stable EU-Turkey relationship. but that this is dependent on Turkish behaviour. Turkey has taken a number of steps which run counter to their obligations, including withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. For real progress to occur, Turkey will need to begin to address its internal human rights situation.

Since I last met with this Committee, President Joe Biden has been inaugurated. The US elections and **transatlantic relations** have been discussed at the FAC four times since we met, and we held a videoconference meeting with Secretary of State Blinken. The EU is committed to strengthening the relationship, working together on foreign policy priorities, strengthening multilateralism and tackling climate change.

### **Continuing Engagement**

I would like to thank Committee members for your continuing engagement on a broad range of foreign policy issues.

I will conclude by saying that Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Security Council in September. This will be an important opportunity to highlight particular issues and themes in keeping with the priorities for our term, and planning for this is well underway.