

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

17 October 2023

Chairperson, Committee Members,

Thank you for this invitation to brief you in my capacity as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

I would like to speak today on some of the foreign policy issues that my Department are focused on, as well as the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy.

The situation in the Middle East is at the forefront of our minds. We have the opportunity for a comprehensive debate on the issue in the Dáil tomorrow, but I also welcome a discussion with the Committee in this setting.

I know this Committee has been deeply involved for many years on the issue of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. I want to use this opportunity to discuss with you the principles which are guiding the Government's response to this crisis.

I also want to touch on the longer-term significance of what we are witnessing.

Firstly though, I would like to reiterate my heartfelt condolences to Kim Damti's family and to the family of Emily Hand. Their deaths, like all the deaths in Israel in the 7 October attack, were deeply shocking. I know that the Committee will join me in these condolences.

We have repeatedly stated our horror with the violence that we have seen in the past 10 days.

We must restate this, again and again.

We have to reject unequivocally, consistently and vocally, those who advocate for violence as a means to resolve the conflict in the Middle East.

The numbers of lives which have been lost or irrevocably damaged continues to rise.

You will have heard me say time and again that a commitment to multilateralism – the rules-international based international order, with the UN Charter at its core – is the cornerstone of Irish foreign policy.

This situation is no different. This has been my message to all my counterparts in Europe and in the region, that I have spoken to.

The UN Secretary-General has made it very clear; even wars have rules.

International humanitarian law exists for a reason. Its overarching aim is to protect civilians.

That means all civilians, everywhere.

As the Red Cross movement, the guardians of international humanitarian law, have said – in the law of armed conflict there is no hierarchy in pain and suffering.

The rules of war exist to help preserve humanity in its darkest moments, and they desperately need to be followed today. They are, and should remain, our compass to ensure that we put humanity first.

I echoed this call in my statement last Sunday.

The rules are clear and they apply to all sides, in all conflicts, everywhere; to state and non-state armed groups alike.

The decision by the Israeli military to tell the entire civilian population in the north of the Gaza strip to move southward for their own safety was unrealistic, unworkable and deeply dangerous.

We are now seeing the terrible humanitarian consequences. There is an urgent need for humanitarian corridors to be established, to deliver vital assistance to Palestinian civilians.

We are in ongoing contact with the UN, ICRC and regional partners on this issue.

I spoke with Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA yesterday. He could not have been more explicit; without urgent humanitarian access, particularly to water and fuel, we are looking at a catastrophic situation within days.

There is no doubt about the brutal criminality of Hamas and their utter disregard for human life, including the lives of their fellow Palestinians.

And let us also be clear that international humanitarian law explicitly prohibits the taking of hostages, the use of civilians as human shields, the locating of military objectives within or near densely populated areas; all actions that Hamas are, and have been, engaged in.

But a distinction must absolutely be made between Hamas and Palestinian civilians.

This is the message that the Government has also been stressing in EU discussions on this crisis, consistently and at all levels.

The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy – which all Member States are part of, and are obliged by the Treaties to implement – is based on the clear underpinning that 'the Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.'

No ifs, no buts.

And Ireland will continue to insist on this in all EU discussions, and in respect of all EU actions and decisions; now and in the coming weeks. The Taoiseach will attend a virtual emergency European Council meeting later this afternoon, where he will again convey this message.

What we do today and in the days ahead must also take account of a longer-term perspective.

We are at a critical juncture. For years, those who have desired a just and sustainable peace, have decried the lack of advancement in any peace process.

Whatever our differences on policy in this room, I know that this is a view that we all share.

We must do everything to avoid the prospect of the voices of extremism on all sides becoming the loudest or only voices.

I am talking not just about Israel and Palestine, but about the many voices external to this conflict.

This is simply too serious for us to misjudge.

Voices of moderation have been drowned out for far, far too long.

That does not mean that Israel should abandon its right to self-defence.

No one, of any political background, can be in any doubt now as to who Hamas are, what they are capable of, and what their objectives are.

Nothing justifies what we witnessed on the 7th October.

None of that means though that we should abandon rationality and reason in our response.

And as outside observers, who care deeply about this situation, the only responsible way forward is to support a future in which people do not utilise political violence to achieve their aims.

This is the foundation upon which peace is built. We can argue over the best ways in which we can achieve this, but we should be clear that this is our aim.

This is an incredibly dark period. It will get darker. The prospects of regional escalation are very real. I spoke with the Iranian Foreign Minister last evening and stressed the urgent need for Iran to use their influence to urge restraint with other groups in the region, above all to Hizbollah. I was unambiguous about the responsibility of all states to work to calm the situation, as well as to bring all possible pressure to bear to release the 200 hostages in Gaza, immediately and unconditionally.

But there is a horizon – there has to be a horizon.

Everything we say and do must be towards ensuring that those who emerge stronger on that horizon are the moderates, and not the extremists. This has been at the heart of my engagement over the last few days.

I would also like to address the situation in Ukraine with you. Since I was last here, this issue has been at the heart of my work and the work of my Department.

Ukraine is continuing to fight for its survival as a state, against an expansionist Russia.

In the 32 years since the formation of the modern Russian Federation, it has declared two annexations of the territory of another sovereign state, and destabilised several others. In five months, we will mark the tenth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea.

We cannot be naïve about Russian objectives and behaviour.

Ukraine is fighting to protect the Europe that we wish to continue to live in. One in which political violence has no home, and in which war cannot be used as a means of competition and dominance.

I will be frank on this point, as its importance to our interests as a state is immense. Russia is fighting a war of attrition in which it believes its persistence is its greatest advantage.

It has failed to reach its stated military objectives in its invasion, and is now hoping to outlast Ukraine's resilience and resources.

We need to ensure that Ukraine has the multi-faceted support required to ensure that Russia does not succeed.

I participated in a visit by EU Foreign Ministers to Kyiv at the start of this month. This was a strong and important signal to both Kyiv and Moscow.

We have a number of significant proposals on the table, including the Ukraine Facility and the Ukraine Assistance Fund, which would see us put in place predictable and sustainable funding for the next few years.

The details of these proposals will have to be carefully considered, but they will deliver benefits for both us and Ukraine, shifting our decision-making and support from an hoc to a structured basis.

I announced an additional package of €23 million for Ukraine during UN High Level Week, bringing our total support since the invasion to more than €210 million.

We will continue with that support as long as necessary.

Chairperson,

This is my first opportunity to address this committee since the Consultative Forum on International Security Policy in June.

I would particularly like to thank those of you who participated in the Forum and in the associated public consultation. You have received a copy of the Chair's report which I presented to Government earlier today.

One of the most striking elements of the report, on first reading, is the degree to which there is broad consensus on many issues.

For example, the pride that Irish people feel towards our international engagement, and the strong sense that there is value in working more closely with our partners, in a manner compatible with our neutrality.

There was clear recognition too that we face emerging threats, particularly in cyberspace and in the maritime domain.

The Forum was also valuable in shining a light on the areas where we must consider our national security arrangements, including an acknowledgment of the need to invest more in Defence Forces capabilities. With an allocation of €1.23 billion in Budget 2024, we anticipate that this will enable further progress on the transformation of the Defence Forces as outlined in the recently published Strategic Framework.

The question of the Triple Lock was also raised. From reading the Chair's report, it is clear that there is no one viewpoint on how best to manage the decision to deploy Irish troops abroad.

However, in my own view, we must consider the challenges facing the UN Security Council in agreeing or renewing UN peacekeeping mandates.

The implications of this for Ireland and our current policy is simply something we have to take seriously.

In an increasingly unpredictable world, we need to work together to navigate the complex choices we face from a baseline of facts and evidence. The Chair's report marks an important contribution to this effort. I look forward to continuing this conversation, both with this Committee and with the wider Oireachtas in the weeks ahead.

Chairperson,

I also wish to touch upon the situation in Northern Ireland.

It is deeply disappointing that almost 18 months on from the last Assembly elections, Northern Ireland's power sharing institutions remain blocked. I, and the Government, are working urgently to support a return of the Assembly and the Executive. I met with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland last week, and am in regular contact with the Northern Ireland parties. I have made it clear to them that this situation cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely.

It is past time that the democratically elected representatives of Northern Ireland are allowed to take up their responsibilities and deliver for their constituents on the range of pressing challenges facing them.

The bilateral Irish-British relationship remains fundamentally important – particularly when it comes to protecting peace on this island. The richness and diversity of ties between our people are unique. Trade is at record levels. In addition to a steady flow of bilateral meetings and visits at political level, institutional structures under Strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement provide important frameworks for cooperation and engagement.

These include the British Irish Council and British Irish Intergovernmental Conference, both of which will convene in Dublin in November. They also include parliamentary structures such as the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

These are fora where we can build relations and engage on important issues like energy cooperation, education and social and economic issues. As a government, we continue to invest in the bilateral relationship. Plans for a new Ireland House in London are evidence of that.

So too are our cooperation frameworks with Scotland and Wales.

I look forward to heading to Bangor with Minister Harris later this week to advance work, for example, on our Shared Statement with Wales. But of course, there is much more work to do, and that remains our focus.

Chairperson,

Earlier this year, I set out Ireland's approach to our relationship with China. I underlined our commitment to engagement on global challenges, and to grow mutually beneficial ties. I reiterated this Government's continued adherence to the One China Policy.

And I made clear that we will act to protect our interests and our values – whether that be taking steps to shore up our economic resilience, advocating for a level playing field for Irish business, or speaking clearly on the preservation and promotion of human rights.

In June, the European Council sent an important and unified message, that provides all EU Member States with a solid platform for sustained engagement. This shared approach is often framed as 'de-risking'.

I want to be clear that this doesn't mean turning our back on an economic, diplomatic and cultural relationship with China.

De-risking is not de-coupling. But it is being cleared eyed about the challenges and risks.

It is in this spirit that I will travel to China in November. I look forward to meeting the Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who I met at the Munich Security Conference and to establish a solid basis for constructive dialogue both on issues on which we share a common interest and on those on which our approaches differ.

Lastly, I wish to briefly mention the significance of last week's budget announcement in terms of the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

2024 will see yet another increase in the Department's development assistance budget, allowing Ireland to help many more people, particularly those impacted by climate change, the war in Ukraine, food insecurity and humanitarian crises. €776.5 million will be allocated to Irish Aid.

This is the highest ever level, representing an increase of €60 million, or 8.4%, on the 2023 allocation. Based on current estimates, this means that total Official Development Assistance for 2024 will amount to €2 billion.

The additional funding, in conjunction with additional funding from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications will enable Ireland to provide a total additional sum of €42.5 million for international climate finance in 2024, a significant step towards meeting our commitment to provide annual funding of at least €225 million by 2025.

I would also have liked to speak in more detail on COP 28 and on my visit to South Africa and Mozambique. As the Committee however requested that I cover both foreign affairs and defence issues at this session, our time for detailed discussion on priority foreign policy issues is necessarily curtailed.

I look forward to our discussions on these and other issues and in the coming months.

Thank you.