

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Déardaoin, 10 Márta 2022

Thursday, 10 March 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Berry,	Catherine Ardagh,
John Brady,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Gary Gannon,	Joe O'Reilly,
David Stanton.	Niall Ó Donnghaile,
	Diarmuid Wilson.

Teachta / Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Update on the Crisis in Ukraine: Engagement with Minister for Foreign Affairs

Chairman: The Minister for Foreign Affairs is welcome before the committee to discuss the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. I remind members of the parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person. As we have less than an hour for this meeting, I will call on the Minister to make his opening remarks straight away. We will then move to questions.

I ask members to desist from taking positions and encourage them to ask direct questions of the Minister, given the timeframe for the meeting and the ongoing fluidity of our situation. There will be other opportunities in other forums to make speeches. I ask the Minister to commence. I thank him and his officials for meeting us.

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): At the outset, I want to speak about the unconscionable attack by Russian forces yesterday in Mariupol. I am sure the committee will join me in expressing profound sorrow and sympathy for the victims of this illegal act of violence. This event speaks directly to the need for international pressure to be brought to bear so that this senseless conflict can be halted as soon as possible.

The implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for all of us in Europe are profound. Every part of Government is working intensely. In our meeting today, I will cover the elements that come under the responsibility of my Department but the challenge is one to which the whole of Government must respond.

Ireland has been always been unwavering in its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We could not have been clearer in calling out the actions of Russia for what they are, that is, a blatant violation of the UN Charter and a breach of international law for which Russia must be held solely accountable. Ireland has been at the forefront of efforts across the multilateral system to respond to Russian aggression, alleviate the humanitarian crisis and bring an end to this conflict. We have joined with 38 other state parties in referring the situation in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court, ICC, to investigate alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. By taking this action, the ICC prosecutor is now able to immediately begin a formal investigation.

The committee will also be aware of our decisive action at the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly. When Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution, we moved immediately to vote in favour of an emergency session of the General Assembly. That session saw an overwhelming majority as 141 UN member states voted in favour of a resolution, which we co-sponsored, deploring Russia's aggression. The extent of support is a powerful demonstration of the widespread global condemnation of Russia's aggression. Only Belarus, Syria, North Korea and Eritrea voted with Russia on that motion, which says a lot.

We have also been at the forefront of the Council's consideration of the deeply worrying humanitarian and nuclear aspects of this crisis. The Council met following the Russian attack on the nuclear power station at Zaporizhzhia. As a member of the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ireland has also given its full support to the agency in trying to manage the serious situation at Ukraine's nuclear sites. All nuclear facilities must be returned to the control of the competent Ukrainian authorities.

We have also been active at the Human Rights Council, co-sponsoring an adopted resolution to establish a commission of inquiry into alleged violations and abuses of human rights and

violations of international humanitarian law.

At the Council of Europe, the Committee of Ministers voted in favour of suspending the Russian Federation from its rights of representation at both the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. I hear today that Russia is leaving the Council of Europe of its own accord, at least for now. I know the Oireachtas members of Ireland's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe are following the situation closely and will travel to Strasbourg next week to express their views on this matter.

At the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, along with 44 other states, we invoked the so-called Moscow mechanism, which allows a mission of experts to be convened to establish the facts and circumstances surrounding Russia's possible violations of international human rights law, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Full, safe and unhindered access to provide humanitarian assistance is urgently needed. Compliance with international humanitarian law by all parties is not optional.

We have looked on in horror as attempts to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people from besieged cities have failed time and time again. Let me be absolutely clear that whatever is agreed or not agreed on humanitarian corridors or other measures, civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected, whether those civilians choose to leave or stay. It is a core obligation under international humanitarian law.

The majority of those who have fled Ukraine are women and children. Those fleeing face increased risks as they do so, including a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence. It remains imperative that they are protected. The inclusion of women in the decision-making processes and humanitarian response, and in any peace negotiations, is essential to ensure that their rights are upheld. Ireland will continue to emphasise that point, as we did at the European Security Council meeting on Monday.

Ireland contributed €10 million in humanitarian assistance on the first day of the invasion. As we speak, my Department is disbursing this funding in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries. The Taoiseach has since announced an additional €10 million and we will act quickly to get these funds to where they are needed most. I will talk about that point further when we are discussing the Estimates because we may need Revised Estimates in that regard later in the year.

As the committee is aware, the EU pursued all means in recent months to engage with President Putin and to urge him to step back. EU leaders, both bilaterally and through the Normandy format, made every diplomatic effort to de-escalate the situation and to prevent war. At the same time, the EU was absolutely clear that further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine would result in massive cost for Russia and that is exactly what has happened. I have been in politics for 23 years and I have never seen EU member states as unified and as resolved as they are in their support for Ukraine.

In the space of just over a week, we have imposed unprecedented sanctions against Russia in three different waves. The sanctions are hitting the web of companies, financial institutions, state institutions and agencies, oligarchs, government members and media interests that surround President Putin and enable the corruption and violence that are currently taking place. The EU has now sanctioned over 800 individuals and over 50 entities. Over 20 Belarusian military leaders have also been added to sanctions lists. Sectoral sanctions target the Russian financial, energy, technology and defence, and transport sectors. They prevent Russian state-owned

media from spreading disinformation in the EU. The sanctions also restrict economic relations between the EU and the breakaway regions in Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as significantly curtailing trade between the EU and Belarus and targeting the Belarusian financial sector.

We have already seen a significant impact. The value of the rouble has plummeted. The Russian Government has had to double interest rates and reintroduce currency controls. The closure of EU airspace has drastically reduced transport options in and out of Russia. The economic and trade measures will hinder Russia's ability to finance its military campaign and further equip its military. The key priority now is the rapid and effective implementation of all of the sanctions agreed to date. Discussions will also continue at EU level on possible additional sanctions.

The EU has also committed over €1 billion in support and, through the European peace facility, the EU has agreed a package of €500 million for the Ukrainian military. In line with our programme for Government commitment, Ireland will pay its full share of approximately €11 million. A figure of between €9 million and €10 million has been out there to date. I want to put on record today that the figure is €11 million as part of that overall €500 million fund. Our contribution will go exclusively to the provision of non-lethal elements within the fund but it is all in the same effort and purpose. There will be approximately €450 million assigned to the provision of lethal weapons. Approximately €50 million of that fund will be to non-lethal elements and that is the €50 million to which we are contributing.

Ukraine has underlined its desire to join the EU. Ireland has been clear in expressing our strong support for Ukraine's aspirations for EU membership. My Department has been helping the many Irish citizens who have found themselves caught in the midst of this conflict and, believe me, some of the situations have been extremely complex. Approximately 45 citizens remain in Ukraine with 157 already departed. We will continue to keep in close contact with them, supporting them in every way we can. There are limitations to that, however, given the fact that much of Ukraine is now a war zone.

Members know already of the extensive work we have been involved in with families with surrogacy arrangements in Ukraine. That will continue. As always, the privacy and security of these families will remain a top priority for me and I will not be talking about their cases in any detail publicly.

This appalling act of aggression against Ukraine offends our common humanity. I said last week in the Dáil, and I repeat it now, that we must lay responsibility clearly where it belongs. This is not a war in which there are two equal contributing parties. That responsibility has to be laid at the feet of the Russian authorities and the Kremlin's leadership.

I pay tribute to the ordinary Russian and Belarusian people who have been protesting this unjustified assault, often at great cost and risk to themselves. I read something when I was in New York two days ago at the Security Council and, from what I can remember, on that day, 4,600 Russians were arrested across Russian cities for protesting. They were willing to take that risk to speak out against the decisions that are being made by their leadership in their names. The Russian and Belarusian communities in Ireland are part of the fabric of this nation and it is important that we continue to show them that they are welcome here, just as we will for the many Ukrainians who now seek refuge with us in Ireland.

Of course, we need to continue to maintain pressure through sanctions to ensure we provide a strong deterrent to the continuation of this war. We must also work with international part-

ners, however, to find a way to turn the tide and persuade the Kremlin that this madness needs to stop and be replaced by negotiation, diplomacy and a ceasefire in order that we can, if necessary, be part of negotiated solutions over time in the absence of war.

In the meantime, we need to be blunt in our language, honest and consistent in terms of the standards that international obligations require of countries big and small in respect of what is happening at the moment in Ukraine, particularly the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure. Yesterday, we saw the horrific images of a maternity and children's hospital where we are told children are buried under the rubble. That is an outrageous act of aggression that cannot go unchecked. We will, as I believe many other countries will as well, ensure there is accountability through all the legal mechanisms and entities available globally to respond to atrocities like that. Unfortunately, however, that is not an isolated case. I think the figure now is that well over 200 schools have been hit. Many hospitals across Ukraine and, of course, many civilian areas in terms of households, apartment blocks and so on are being brutalised from the air and from artillery positions.

This war is having an enormous cost. It will fundamentally change global politics even if it ends tomorrow which, unfortunately, it will not. For us, as a European country within the European Union, it is, unfortunately, fundamentally changing the security arrangements on this continent and the relationship between Russia and the rest of Europe. I suspect we will be having many conversations at this committee in the future in that regard from a security, defence, foreign policy and EU perspective as we learn lessons from what continues to unfold on a daily basis.

Chairman: I thank the Minister for all his work, which is acknowledged and appreciated by our committee. We have six members and one Minister present. We have 30 minutes, therefore, no speeches. I am keen to get a second round of questions. Members can do the maths here. There are many topics and questions for the Minister, therefore, I ask members to ask direct questions. I know the Minister will deal with them satisfactorily by way of reply. I will start with Deputy Brady and move on to Deputy Stanton.

Deputy John Brady: I do not need to repeat everything I said in terms of my condemnation. I will say that at the outset. I commend all the officials within the Department and all the other Departments who are working tirelessly on this issue and the fallout from it. I want to put that on record. I welcome the fact that the formal process with the International Criminal Court, ICC, has been initiated when we see cluster munitions, vacuum bombs, etc., and the impact that is having on civilians.

I will mention a few specifics. During the week, our ambassador to Moscow, Mr. Brian McElduff, was called in to be reprimanded - I am not sure who he was called in before - because of Ireland's actions and actions taken here by some. I want to get a view from the Minister on what was said. Russia stated that there will be repercussions for countries that have taken actions and imposed sanctions or whatever. Can I get a viewpoint on that?

In terms of the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding, even as we speak, we see more Russian troops starting to move an inch closer to encircle Kyiv. There has been a massive exodus of civilians. I heard the mayor of Kyiv say that 50% of the civilian population has now been displaced, leading to more than 2 million people fleeing over the borders into Moldova, Poland and elsewhere.

There is an awful lot of goodwill here in Ireland. I have spoken to many people who want

to go there and provide humanitarian assistance. I have also been contacted by Irish citizens who want to go there and take up arms to defend Ukraine and stand with the Ukrainian people. I would like to get the Minister's view on that.

With regard to the potential for nuclear catastrophe, there have been threats in terms of the positioning and getting ready of nuclear weapons. We also had a very concerning development around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and the inability to cool some of the materials and fuels there. I would like the Minister's perspective in terms of preparedness in what hopefully will not evolve into a situation where there is a catastrophe like that.

I welcome the third round of sanctions. There has been much focus on the International Financial Services Centre, IFSC, and the washing of dirty oligarch Russian money through the IFSC. Is the Minister satisfied at this stage that this has now ended and that the sanctions that are in place will cover that? It was stated last week that potentially three companies have been identified and are being looked at. I would like the Minister's view on that.

I will make two final points around diplomacy. We have a seat on the UN Security Council. The Russian foreign minister, Mr. Sergey Lavrov, is in Turkey today taking part in the highest level of talks to date. God only knows what will come out of that. Apart from our position on the Security Council, what are we doing outside of that in terms of pushing the diplomatic route? What analysis has been done? The Minister said Ireland will only move in tandem with the EU but on the question of expelling diplomats from Ireland, including the ambassador, my view and that of my party is well known. Now is the time, even if we have to act unilaterally, to move on that.

Deputy David Stanton: I take it the Russian ambassador has been invited to the Department on more than one occasion recently to hear the Minister's views and those of Ireland on this issue. I assume those views have been expressed very openly such that the Russian Government can be no under no illusion as to how we feel. Will the Minister comment on that?

Has the €11 million that is to be provided under the European peace facility been paid over yet? Is the equipment being purchased centrally through Europe or are we doing it ourselves? I heard a person from Ukraine on television the other night saying that flak jackets, helmets and other defensive and protective equipment are badly needed there.

The Minister said that Ireland is deeply committed to, and supports, the application of Ukraine to join the European Union. Where does he see that going? Can it be fast-tracked and, if so, would that have an impact on the European peace mechanism whereby different European states are committed to support each other in the event of their being attacked? If that happened, what would the impact be? There are some countries that are ambivalent, to say the least, about what is going on. Have the Government and the EU done anything to try to persuade them to be more objective in their interaction with the dreadful situation that is going on in Ukraine? India and China, for instance, come to mind, as well as others. If they were to be more vocal, it might assist in some way.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We all are aware of the statements the Russian ambassador made to the Russian television station, Russia-24, in which he described Ireland as being a hotbed of anti-Russian sentiment. I do not think anyone here is anti-Russian but we certainly are anti-Putin and we are opposed to the federation in which he is involved. Did the Minister talk to the ambassador about his statement to a television station with 8 million viewers that Ireland is anti-Russian? What does that expose us to in terms of threats, particularly cybersecurity

threats? Has an analysis been done on that?

Regarding the Ukrainian refugees heading towards Poland, has any thought been given to sending buses or aircraft from Ireland to transport people seeking sanctuary back here instead of having to make their own way?

Chairman: I am sure the Minister is taking note of the questions. Given the severe time constraints, I will take questions from a few more members before going back to him, hoping that is not inconvenient to anyone.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I congratulate the Minister and his Department and, as Deputy Brady said, all of the Departments. It is amazing how quickly this country can react to a crisis. The Minister is to be commended on his leadership in this matter on the international stage. Credit where credit is due.

Our position on neutrality was stated in a White Paper by the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1995. Is that still our position regarding neutrality? We cannot sit back now and expect Russia just to concentrate its efforts in Ukraine. Given the sanctions we have implemented against the Russian Federation and the Russian oligarchs, there is a serious risk now to all of us, particularly in the area of cybersecurity and especially in respect of banking and financial transactions. There are a number of employees who are Irish citizens acting as monitors at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE. Is the Department in contact with those staff and are we sure of their safety? They were monitoring borders and the like and I am a little concerned for them.

I want to raise an issue that does not reflect my view but which needs to be dealt with and today is the day to do so. Given that we have introduced visa-free provisions for Ukrainians coming to this country, thereby giving them full rights under European regulations, including a right to work and obtain access to social welfare, health services etc., the question is being asked in the public domain, and the Minister will have an opportunity to answer it today, as to whether we have set up a two-tier refugee system under which the same facilities are not available to people coming from Syria, Afghanistan and other war-torn parts of the world. Will he comment on that?

Chairman: The Senator is talking about internal matters, which I am sure the Minister will address briefly. It is more of a domestic issue for Ireland rather than one for the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: That is fair enough. My last point concerns the representations I have had from people in Georgia and Moldova. Both of those countries are really concerned about the likelihood that Russia will make a move on their borders. Are there any plans to bring them into the EU family?

Chairman: I note that we are joined on the line by Senators Wilson and Ardagh. I ask that they raise their hands if they want to put a question to the Minister. The next speaker is Senator O'Reilly.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister. As Irish people, we are extraordinarily proud of our performance on this issue, of how we have been so welcoming and accommodating and of the way we have broken down bureaucratic obstacles to accepting the incredible number of displaced Ukrainian people coming to this country. We can be very proud of the Irish effort from all the Departments, including that of the Minister, and of his leadership in this

area. I ask him to forgive me for being unavoidably absent during his presentation. He may have answered some of the questions I am asking but I would like to hear his responses in any case. People outside the Oireachtas need to hear those responses.

First, does he see any glimmer of hope on the diplomatic front? Through his influence within the UN Security Council, does he entertain any prospect of that at this time? Are there any green shoots, to use a cliché, in terms of a possibility that reason could enter into this?

Second, the Minister always makes the point, correctly, that Ireland is working in concert with our European partners. Is he satisfied that we have dotted the i's and crossed the t's on sanctions and there is nothing left that we could be doing? Has he done such an audit or inventory to ensure everyone is performing? This is not all within his departmental brief but it is all relevant.

I support what Senator Craughwell said about Ukraine's application for EU membership. Will the Minister comment on that? It would be a great signal to grant membership to Ukraine and, indeed, to Georgia. We are living in exceptional times and it should be done, as I said to him on the most recent occasion he was in the Seanad. I disagree with my colleague, Senator Craughwell, on our neutrality. We cannot act in a knee-jerk fashion in this regard. I have great respect for the Senator but we must agree to disagree on this. It is a matter that requires much more consideration.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I welcome the Minister. Colleagues have asked a range of questions, many of which I intended to raise. I have only one additional one, which is somewhat complex. I appreciate the diplomacy involved in it. Regarding our response to the refugee crisis, has the Minister had any engagement with colleagues and individual Ministers in the North, given what is happening, to see whether there can be practical co-ordination in our response? Many people I have spoken to in the North are deeply frustrated by the approach of the British Government and the Home Office to the issue of refugees. It is anathema to their instinctive response. Has that engagement taken place? If it has not is it something that can be considered within the confines of the political realities which I appreciate and understand? There is a lot of goodwill there. As other colleagues have said there are already many delegations travelling over with humanitarian aid from the North. I am sure there would be a great deal of willingness to support this where it can be done. That is something to look at.

Chairman: Returning to the Minister, I am sorry if so many different questions are included in this first round but that is the nature of things. Having regard to the time available to us I know the Minister will deal with them insofar as he can. I acknowledge what he said about coming back to the committee at a time that is convenient to himself. For my own part I merely want to support strongly what Senator Craughwell said in regard to neighbouring Moldova where there is an urgent humanitarian crisis with tens of thousands of refugees crossing in an unregulated way on a daily basis. This is proving to be a huge challenge for Moldova, a neutral country, and like Ireland with neutrality enshrined in its constitution. It is very fearful for its own future now. I ask that the Minister's officials and his colleagues at European level come to the aid of Moldova. I ask the Minister to deal with the issues as he deems appropriate in response to Deputy Brady. I call Deputy Stanton.

Deputy David Stanton: There are a number of Irish citizens in Russia and Belarus. Have many managed to get out and how many are left? Has any consideration been given to having our Defence Forces here assist with the intake of refugees?

Deputy Simon Coveney: On the Moldova issue, I know that the Chairman has spoken to the Moldovan ambassador in regard to some of these concerns, as I am sure others have too. We are due to meet them tomorrow to follow up to see if we can provide any assistance there. I have made it very clear to colleagues in the EU countries that border Ukraine that we are available to help in any way we can from a logistics perspective, or quite frankly any other perspective, in regard to helping countries to deal with an enormous flow of people, in particular Poland which is taking roughly 50% of all Ukrainians coming into the EU. Slovakia, Hungary and Romania are also taking in Ukrainians. Can we imagine if Ireland had to deal with 1 million people in a week coming into Ireland, to process them, feed them and provide shelter and supports? That is what Poland is going through at the moment. The generosity of the response has been breathtaking. The most difficult issue, politically, in the EU for the past ten years has been migration. We could not agree on anything on how to deal with migration, how to burden-share in the EU, how countries in northern and western Europe could support those in the south that were impacted by significant numbers of migrants and asylum seekers coming from North Africa and the Middle East and so on. Within the space of 48 hours the EU effectively signed off on a temporary protection mechanism which essentially allowed an unlimited number of Ukrainians to come to anywhere in the EU and effectively be treated as EU citizens in terms of supports, housing, healthcare, education, social welfare supports and so on. This is what solidarity actually means. Of course there have been problems on the border given the numbers. However, in general the response from countries that are highly sensitive politically to migration generally, like Hungary, Slovakia and Poland in particular over the past number of years, have set all of that aside. They expect, and are right to expect, solidarity from countries like Ireland in terms of helping with those efforts in the days and weeks ahead. As of this morning we have had about 2,500 Ukrainians arrive here. We can expect that figure to increase by many multiples in the weeks ahead. I will answer some of the questions in terms of why that is the case.

In that context, Moldova is under enormous pressure because Moldova is in many ways a country in between Ukraine and the EU and has had to deal with enormous numbers, including some of our most complex cancer cases in terms of a route through Moldova, out of Ukraine.

Deputy Brady mentioned the ICC. I am a big supporter of the ICC, so is Ireland, but many powerful countries are not. It is important that this process is begun in terms of gathering information and evidence. Whether it will actually result in a prosecution of President Putin remains to be seen but we have to do everything we can to support Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor, who has now opened a formal investigation and file on this with the support of 39 countries. Ireland was one of the early members of that group.

In regard to our ambassador in Moscow, I am not going to go into conversations that have happened between the ambassador and authorities in Moscow apart from saying it is not that unusual, when there is tension, for our ambassador abroad to be called in by a foreign office in another country. It has happened in Israel many times with different ambassadors. He was asked in after the incident in the Russian embassy here in Dublin, which was an unfortunate incident actually because it has distracted attention away from some of the core messages that we need to deliver. That was not an unexpected conversation and I am not overly surprised by it at all.

The entire EU is now on an official list of unfriendly countries. We do not quite know what that is going to mean. It normally means that there are decisions made following up that designation such as targeted sanctions or removal of diplomats. That is what happened with the

Czech Republic a few months ago when it was named an unfriendly nation towards Russia. Let us wait and see what happens there. We do not know yet.

In regard to Kyiv and 50% of the civilian population leaving, I am not surprised at that. It means 50% of the population is still there too. Many of them are incredibly determined to fight for their city, their country, their families. The response of the Ukrainian population has been extraordinary in terms of courage and resolve. It was underestimated by Russia. That was not the only thing that has been underestimated. The resolve of the EU and the West more generally was also underestimated.

On Irish assistance, I say very clearly that the advice of the Department of Foreign Affairs to everybody is not to travel to Ukraine. Whether you feel you want to join the fight or whether you want to deliver aid, whatever the motivation, we have very clear travel advice not to travel to Ukraine unless you are part of an international organisation that is formally tasked with delivering aid. The UN has done much work with Russia in trying to secure access for UN humanitarian organisations to get assistance into parts of Ukraine. Those arrangements and negotiations are hugely important in terms of humanitarian assistance but that is a different thing from somebody just deciding to go. I ask everybody to be clear in our messaging on that and to keep everybody safe.

The nuclear concerns are real. We are a board member on the IEA and there are two different nuclear plants that have been a cause for concern. I know about Chernobyl very well and have been involved in campaigns linked to Chernobyl in the past before coming into politics. Turning off the power to that facility or to parts of it raises concerns around safety in terms of the management of nuclear waste, maintaining temperatures and so on. The statements from the International Atomic Energy Agency, IAEA, have been clear on that and somewhat reassuring during the past 24 hours, but we need to keep a very close eye on it. The much larger plant, which has six reactors, is the largest nuclear power station in Europe. The fact it was fired on as part of the conflict is very worrying and it had quite a serious fire in a training facility next door. Our understanding is those facilities are safe for now. In all conflict there are very clear rules of engagement regarding nuclear facilities with which the Russian military need to comply and to take note of as opposed to the reckless actions we saw.

In terms of the International Financial Services Centre, IFSC, I have said before and I will say it again, we will ensure that in Ireland we are compliant with the sanctions that have been put in place, whether that be with respect to financial services or any other areas.

On the talks in Turkey, I read in the media, but I cannot be sure, there has been no agreement on a ceasefire or on humanitarian aid corridors, and those talks have ended. It is not great, I am afraid, but I certainly commend Turkey on its efforts. Much of the discussion in New York at the start of this week was focused on trying to explore the question of who would approach Russia and how it could be approached to try to change the course of what has been happening. Certainly, Turkey is an important potential contributor to those efforts, as are China and India. I would strongly appeal publicly to China, in particular. It is a global superpower. It has responsibilities like everybody else in the international community to call out breaches of international law and to do what it can to make a positive contribution towards peace, a ceasefire, and an absence of war. It is important to state that.

On the issue of diplomatic engagement and expelling the ambassador, as I have said previously, it is hard to say credibly on the one hand we should expel the ambassador and therefore shut down the Russian embassy in Dublin, because if we expel the ambassador the embassy

is gone, and say on the other hand we need to be pursuing diplomatic efforts and channels of communication to try to persuade Russia to change course. That does not make sense to me. I understand the sentiment, the anger and why people would want to expel the Russian ambassador and many others. I understand the sentiment behind that and the calls for that. However, the judgment the Government has made, the three party leaders and me, is that we need to keep diplomatic channels open, even in wartime situations when we are highly critical of the actions Russia continues to take every day, and we need to do so for a number of reasons.

First, we have Irish citizens in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia and I have an obligation to them. Second, I am not aware of any country in the world that has expelled its Russian ambassador and there is a reason for that, namely, in wartime situations, channels of communication are important if we are trying to work towards a ceasefire, an absence of war, humanitarian interventions and so on. Despite how angry one might be with a country or its leadership or how vehemently one disagrees with the decisions it is making, having no communication channels does not make sense. That being said, looking at other options in terms of asking some people to leave is something the EU is discussing collectively and I have had numerous conversations with other foreign ministers in that regard, and I am not ruling anything out there. Basic channels of diplomatic communications are important if the ultimate objective here is to end war, which it is. There are a whole load of other things we need to do too but, ultimately, an awful lot of the other channels become much easier if we could secure the end of-----

Chairman: I hesitate to intervene to inform the Minister we are into the final five minutes of the meeting.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will try to be quicker. Deputy Stanton asked had the Russian ambassador been to the Department. Yes, he has been multiple times and there have been multiple phone calls. The ambassador is in no doubt as to our view and that has being delivered at a very senior level from the Secretary General and assistant secretary on different occasions. Those conversations take place perhaps not every day but I would say every second day.

The €11 million for the European Peace Facility has not been spent yet but it will be. That money has been available. We are also looking to see what gear we can provide and we will make some decisions on that shortly, having taken account of what we have that is spare and available. The members would be surprised there is not as much as they might think but there is some military defensive equipment that would be useful. We are making decisions on that as we speak and we will get it to Ukraine as quickly as we can.

In terms of Ukraine's EU membership, Ireland is a strong supporter of fast-tracking that process and getting Ukraine formally designated as an applicant country. I suspect when the leaders meet in Versailles today, that is one of the issues they will discuss because getting consensus on that is important. The EU membership process is quite complex and has a load of legalities and benchmarks that need to be met and so on. We should not forget that quite a few other countries are in the queue. That needs to be managed sensitively, but if ever there was a country whose people were literally giving their lives for the value system we hold dear in the European Union and what drives democracy in our Union, it is Ukraine at the moment. That has to be reflected in the political decisions we make.

Deputy Gannon asked about the Russian ambassador's comments on Russian media. He reflected the fact there is a very strong feeling in Ireland against the decisions the Russian leadership has made. Obviously, there have been demonstrations in Ireland. I think what the ambassador said was that Irish people are to the fore of protesting and demonstrating against

Russia or something like that. I am not surprised by that because Irish people are outraged by it.

Deputy Gary Gannon: He said we were anti-Russian.

Deputy Simon Coveney: For the record, Irish people are not.

Deputy Gary Gannon: They are not.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Irish people are anti the Russian leadership and the decisions it is making right now. It is very important for all of us to keep delivering the message that Russian citizens in Ireland and Russian children in Irish schools should not be targeted or blamed for what is happening in Ukraine. This is not in their name. Russian people in Ireland are welcome. However, the decisions the Russian leadership and the Kremlin are making need to be strongly criticised by Ireland and that is what we are trying to do, and we are trying to make that clear distinction.

Regarding whether we should we be sending buses to the border to bring people back, I know some people personally who are planning to do that and are trying to organise that logistically. There are two airports, or numerous airports, that people can access. It is much easier to fly to Ireland than to get on a bus and make that journey. It is a long trip factoring in ferries and all the rest of it. We should, by and large, try to make it as easy as possible for people to come here and for them to fly here. Both Aer Lingus and Ryanair have been quite active in that space, as have other airlines. Members would be aware the Ministers, Deputies McEntee and Humphreys, were in Dublin Airport yesterday meeting Ukrainian refugees coming into the country. We want to make sure we have a structured welcome arrangement when they arrive so that people are not lost in the airport not knowing where to go. We are putting all those facilities in place now. This is a massive logistical exercise. Ireland's allocation key, in terms of burden sharing, is normally about 2%. Four million people could end up coming from Ukraine into the EU. In fact, that is quite likely and it may go beyond that figure if the conflict continues. For every 1 million, that is 20,000 in Ireland. We may not reach those numbers, but it is certainly possible we will and we may go well beyond it. We need to be prepared for that and have a mindset that will allow us to cope with that. This is a wartime situation by which Ireland is being impacted.

We have seen the extraordinary generosity of Irish people making private offers of accommodation. I believe there have been up to 10,000 offers of accommodation on the Irish Red Cross website so far. The Minister for Justice and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth are working to co-ordinate that, and we now have an agreed management system among Departments to determine how we manage it weekly. We are putting this together as we go because we simply do not have time to plan. There is no six-month lead-in time here; people are coming today. Somewhere between 400 and 600 people are expected to arrive from Ukraine today.

Senator Craughwell asked about the stated position on Irish neutrality. I was taking parliamentary questions in the House earlier and I think I gave strong answers on that. My view as to what Irish neutrality is, or military non-alignment, if people want to call it that, is that we decide when we get involved in a conflict or not and when we take sides or not, and our positions are not required of us by an alliance to which we have signed up that can suck us into a conflict and so on. It is up to the Government and the Parliament to decide what we do and when we do it. Nevertheless, let me be clear: in regard to what is happening in Ukraine, we are not neutral. In fact, we are actively funding and supplying equipment to the Ukrainian military to help it de-

fend itself and the civilians in that country. We have chosen to take sides in that regard because we believe the Russian aggression is not only illegal and inconsistent with the UN charter but is also something on which Ireland, morally, needs to take a stand.

Chairman: I apologise for interrupting but I must now blow the whistle because there are other important engagements.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I can revert to the committee in writing if that is desired.

Chairman: It would be most helpful if a short email could be addressed to any members who had specific questions. We expect the Minister to come back before the committee at an early opportunity as matters evolve and develop in this crisis.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Yes. Some members have left the meeting but I might make one final point about cyber. There is an increased cyber threat, in our assessment, and we are taking the appropriate precautions in that regard, including through a heightened sense of awareness and concern in that space. I will not go into further detail as we are tight on time.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. Deputy Brady wishes to make one very brief intervention.

Deputy John Brady: The focus, rightly, is on trying to help refugees coming into the country, but as more and more of them arrive, the first port of call for many will be public representatives. Could some sort of mechanism be considered, whether a dedicated phone line or something else, to allow us to make inquiries? These are cross-departmental issues and sometimes they can be difficult to navigate.

Chairman: We have mentioned this before. I expect it will be a matter for the Department of the Taoiseach but we will ask the Minister to convey that message in any event.

The joint committee will now adjourn. After the break, the Minister will join us for a meeting of the select committee, unaccompanied by his officials. On both my behalf and that of committee members, I thank Ms Orla McBreen, Ms Cait Moran, Ms Maeve Collins, who is not here, Mr. Ruairí de Búrca, our official, Ms Emma McCarron, and others for keeping us updated with what are now daily briefings. We ask them to continue in the same vein insofar as they can because their work is very useful to us as public representatives.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.35 p.m. until 3.15 p.m. on Tuesday, 22 March 2022.