

Security Council Meeting on US Airstrikes in Syria

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What's In Blue

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This morning, the Security Council is expected to be briefed by Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman, on yesterday's strikes by the US on the Shayrat airbase outside of Homs in Syria. Bolivia had asked for a briefing from the Secretariat in consultations, but it seems that the US, as president of the Council this month, chose to hold a public briefing.

According to the US, the launch of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles from two Navy warships in the Mediterranean sea were a response to the 4 April chemical weapons attack against civilians in the Khan Shaykhun area of Idlib in which at least 72 civilians were killed, including many children. The US has said that no lives were lost although Syrian aircraft were destroyed in its attack, while the Syrian media claims that seven, including four children, were killed.

The US Air Strikes

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued a statement today calling for accountability for the chemical weapons attack and appealing for restraint to avoid any acts that could deepen the suffering of the Syrian people. He also underscored the centrality of a political solution to the conflict in Syria, and called on parties to renew their commitment to making progress through the Geneva talks. In addition, he also called on the Council to unite in exercising its responsibility for international peace and security. In his briefing, Feltman is expected to reiterate these points.

Some Council members have reacted publicly to the airstrikes. Japan, Italy, France, Ukraine and the UK have been publicly supportive of the action taken by the US. Russia has condemned the act, calling it "an aggression against a sovereign government in violation of the norms of international law", and is likely to elaborate on this position during the meeting. China has emphasised the need for a political settlement and urged all relevant parties "to stay calm, exercise restraint and avoid doing anything that might raise tensions". Bolivia, which called for the meeting, has made it clear that they see this act as a threat to international peace and security. A number of other elected members are urging a political solution. Egypt has called on the US and Russia to act on the basis of international resolutions and to "reach a comprehensive and final solution" to the crisis. Sweden, while condemning the chemical attack, questioned the international legal basis for the action and urged the UN Security Council to take responsibility to seek a lasting political solution to the conflict. A number of members are expected to question the US's legality of the action and what role the Council can play now.

Negotiations on Draft Texts on the Chemical Attack

Following the reports of the chemical attack on 4 April, France, the UK and the US

circulated a draft resolution that evening condemning the attack, expressing full support to the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and requesting that it report the results of its investigation as soon as possible. It recalled language in previous resolutions regarding the cooperation of the Syrian government and all parties in Syria with the OPCW and the UN, including with the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM). Regarding the chemical weapons attack, the draft emphasised that this includes the obligation upon Syria to provide the JIM and the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) with information on air operations (such as flight plans and flight logs), names of all individuals in command of any helicopter squadrons, and access to air bases from which the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) or the FFM believe chemical weapons attacks may have been launched, as well as to respond to meeting requests with generals and other officers. The draft further requested the Secretary-General to report every 30 days on whether this information has been provided. In addition, it recalled language in resolution 2118 threatening to impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in the event of non-compliance.

The drafters had hoped to put the draft to a vote on the afternoon on 5 April, but the lack of support from other permanent members led to P5 negotiations throughout the day. The draft resolution was put in blue with minor adjustments yesterday (6 April). Russia, which had raised questions about the intent of the draft and the facts available regarding the chemical weapons attack, proposed an alternative draft resolution. The Russian draft, which did not condemn the attack, requested the OPCW to share with the Council the personal composition of the team that will investigate the incident for the Council's consideration. It also decided that the report of the fact-finding mission and the JIM should include all the evidences collected at the site of the incident and be provided to the Council for consideration. By the end of the day yesterday, both resolutions were in blue.

Elected members, convened by Sweden, met to discuss working methods on the negotiations of the two drafts in the face of increasing frustration that they had not been consulted in the negotiation process. At the meeting, they discussed the idea of providing an alternative draft that could represent a compromise among the positions of permanent members. Working from the P3 draft, they proposed to substitute language on the Syrian government's obligation to provide information, which was a contentious issue in P5 negotiations, with agreed language from resolution 2118. The new language included a reference to the obligation of Syria to comply with the recommendations of the OPCW and the UN regarding the provision of security and the granting of immediate and unfettered access. Even though last night's negotiations were intended to secure the agreement of permanent members to the E10 draft, it seems only China expressed support for it. At press time, there was no further movement on the different drafts reacting to the chemical weapons attack.

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