

20 April, 2012

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST REF: 0380-12

Thank you for email of 29 March asking for further information on the Foreign Secretary's announcement of additional assistance to the Syrian opposition.

I have been asked to respond on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's behalf, as a member of the Syria team.

As you may be aware we continue to urge the various elements of the Syrian opposition to work together to achieve a common vision for a future Syria that responds to the aspirations of all members of Syrian society. The Foreign Secretary informed Parliament on 17 April, that the Syrian opposition has taken initial steps to improve its cohesiveness. For example, at the Friends of Syria meeting in Istanbul on 1st April, the largest opposition group, the Syria National Council (SNC), pledged to put in place a restructured, broader opposition platform to advance their common vision. The Foreign Secretary welcomed this and has called on them to sustain this momentum. However, further progress is required to ensure broad and inclusive representation from all Syrian communities.

The Foreign Secretary took the decision to provide an additional half a million pounds to support the Syrian opposition and civil society to help them realise their vision of a future Syria, as part of the joint Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ministry of Defence and Department for International Development Conflict Pool. These monies are being used to bolster £450,000 already spent over the last ten months on training and capacity building to the Syrian opposition in a number of key areas, including leadership, co-ordination, strategic communications, strategy development and human rights.

As you note, this includes agreement in principle to provide support to the political opposition inside Syria. This additional support is intended to help Syrian political oppositionists to:

- develop themselves as a credible alternative to Assad and his regime;
- keep themselves safe against regime repression and violence by communicating effectively;
- get improved access to humanitarian assistance;
- develop the necessary capability to realise an orderly transition to a more democratic Syria;

In addition, the UK will be expanding its support for activists to ensure accountability. We are already working together with partners to ensure that no options for justice are closed to the Syrian people. Gathering and securing evidence is critical. The UK sent an expert mission to the region last month to help document the atrocities that have taken place. We have also trained Syrian human rights activists to document violations accurately and in accordance with international standards.

We will provide further training to human rights activists from Syrian towns which have witnessed severe repression to build their capacity to gather, document and store evidence of human rights violations and abuses. The UK is also looking at providing expert advice to nascent Syrian civil society groups, to help professionalise their reporting on human rights issues and improve their transparency.

Finally, we will provide UK expertise to support the Syrian opposition and civil society groups as they start to tackle the challenges of a sustainable political transition, including how to maintain essential services, revive the economy and deliver comprehensive constitutional reform.