

Assad must not get away with it

We have to act in the face of Syrian atrocities, argues
Lord Robertson

The use of Sarin nerve gas against the civilian population of Syria is an act of unique violence, depravity and illegality. To stand back and let Bashar al-Assad get away with such an outrage would be a permanent stain on the civilised world.

After 2½ years of unrestrained viciousness in Syria, 100,000 people are dead, many more horribly injured or tortured and more than 2m people, half of them children, displaced or expelled from their country. Assad, now reinforced by Hezbollah and Iran, sees no obstacle to scorching the earth to brutally eliminate any vestige of opposition.

And what signal did he get from the House of Commons? The proposition was to signal our revulsion at a specific act of indecency. Just that. Not regime change or a land invasion. Not even the arming of the opposition who so many countries have agreed now represent the Syrian people. Only a commitment in principle to a surgical attack on the command and control of the military machine using poison gas against defenceless women and children.

But they voted it down. And then, almost unbelievably, the prime minister said that he would not bring back the issue. Not even if they used Sarin again. Not even if Nato ally Turkey was attacked. Not even if Assad took a leaf out of his father's book and razed cities and their population to dust. "Parliament has spoken", so we turn away, averting our eyes to hideous violence only three hours flying time from our coast. It beggars belief.

Of course, it has happened before. When the elected government of Spain was overthrown by Franco's fascists, western governments proclaimed "non-intervention". Hitler spotted the opportunity and the republic was snuffed out. Hitler got the message. Act decisively and ruthlessly and the outside world will turn away. If Britain had not then acted on its own over the subsequent invasion of Poland then Hitler's informed gamble would have paid off and this article, if it appeared at all, would be in German.

And then there was Kosovo. In March 1999, I was defence secretary and Robin Cook the foreign secretary of this country and we saw the secret intelligence of Milosevic's Operation Horseshoe. That was his plan to use extreme violence including murder, torture, burnings and rape to rid Kosovo of its majority Albanian population. We felt we had to act to stop him but a host of familiar voices called for delay. More diplomacy they said, a security council resolution, a pathetic plea to the killers to desist, even more intelligence. One distinguished Labour big-wig told me you could not bomb Milosevic back to the negotiating table. The SNP leader called our mercy attacks on the murderers "unpardonable folly".

We never did get the security council resolution — Russia and China saw to that. Milosevic thumbed his nose and brought in cattle trucks to trans-ship the Albanians to exile. The paramilitaries burned and violated just as Assad's thugs are doing today. But Nato acted decisively, ignoring the nay sayers — and the Kosovars were saved. The hideous ethnic cleansing ended, the refugees went home, Kosovo is independent and integrated and at peace with its neighbour and Milosevic died facing justice for his crimes in The Hague.

Of course the Commons spoke last week and there is no doubt that unease exists about getting involved in a messy civil war. After Iraq some people will simply deny the evidence even of their own eyes and turn away. But the door of Britain and its lawmakers has to stay open to help the people of Syria. It must to all decent people in our country be unacceptable that because of one vote, one Thursday night, we give Assad free rein to smash opposition, use illegal weapons, and blast his way to victory — the victory of the graveyard.

Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's remarkable and brave Middle East editor, said this week that Assad would simply soak up a limited missile strike and get on with the violence. So one attack may not be enough to bring sanity to the Damascus warlords.

Months ago we took sides in this civil war. We, and dozens of other countries, said that the Syrian National Coalition, whose leaders were in London this week, were the true representatives of the Syrian people. We said so, but did precious little about it. It's time we did.

So, if President Obama, the most reluctant military activist, feels action is unavoidable, if the French decide that they too must join him, if Assad returns to further chemical attack or more blanket violence and if the intelligence and the facts on the ground become ever more clear and unambiguous then the Commons must surely reconsider its first and hasty decision.

And if the growing refugee crisis threatens to further destabilise Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey then it would be indefensible if Britain turned a blind eye. To refuse to act in the face of wanton human destruction would be to set a truly terrible precedent for the future and how we would rue the day.

Lord Robertson was secretary-general of Nato and secretary of state for defence