April 4th 2011

Dear Prime Minister

Health consequences of recent events in Libya

As the UK affiliate of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), Medact fully supports their statement on the situation in Libya issued on March 23rd calling for an immediate ceasefire, and respect for international humanitarian law, including the articles specifically related to health and health workers (attached).1

While recognising that Libya is just one of the countries undergoing upheavals in the region, the following refers specifically to Libya as it is only here that UK forces are actively involved in conflict. We have already been in communication with relevant members of the Government about events at Salmaniya Medical Complex in Manama.

We understand that implementation of the no-fly zone is under the authorisation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973; however it needs to be very clear what restrictions UNSCR 1973 places on what the informal alliance, and now NATO, can do. Also it is imperative that international humanitarian law – independently of the UN Resolution – should continue to govern what the UK does in Libya.

While we appreciate the efforts to limit civilian casualties, the nature of air strikes and the types of missiles being used raise serious concerns about the actions being proportional and discriminate. The potential inaccuracies of this type of strike were devastatingly illustrated when we understand was an A-10 ‘tank buster’ plane destroyed a convoy which included an ambulance, killing 13 ‘rebels’ including 3 medical students and the ambulance driver on April 2nd. We emphasise the first Geneva Convention Article 19 which relates to the protection of health workers carrying out their duties. We are also concerned that the RAF, according to Sir Steven Dalton as reported by Nick Hopkins in today’s Guardian newspaper, is planning to continue operations over Libya for at least 6 months.

It appears that the UK Government may be seeking to interpret UNSCR 1973 in a way that would allow the arming of one side and may even be considering launching attacks using ground forces. This would mean that the UK has effectively armed both sides in the conflict in the course of one year, as the UK cleared for export in 2010 various military equipment including teargas/irritant

ammunition, ‘accessories’ for military small arms training, technology for ‘military communications equipment’, small arms ammunition, weapon sights, sniper rifles, ‘command and control vehicles’, radio jamming equipment and ‘civil explosive detection/identification equipment’.

As a government that sees itself as promoting peace in the world, we would also suggest that your tour to Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman on 21 and 22 February 2011, accompanied by UK arms dealers including Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems, Cobham Group, Qinetiq, Thales and Ultra Electronics, was very ill-timed, as was your decision to send Defence Minister Gerald Howarth to lead a delegation to the International Defence Exhibition and Conference in Abu Dhabi.

The current situation in Libya looks very likely to lead to a tragic and protracted conflict, with more volunteers assuming arms and thereby – it is important to recognise – becoming combatants under both international law and UNSCR 1973, whichever side they are on. A continuation of the conflict will inevitably lead to more civilian deaths and injuries, and longer term drastic public health consequences for the general population. It would also escalate the rapidly developing humanitarian crises developing on and over the borders of Libya, and in places such as Lampedusa, which already need urgent attention and a swift humanitarian response.

To minimize the public health effects of the present conflict a ceasefire should be urgently and vigorously pursued and a peaceful resolution negotiated involving all relevant players on the basis of the potential they have to limit the conflict. To this end we commend the work of UK diplomats with the Interim National Council in Benghazi on a possible cease-fire, and also the apparent diplomatic moves by Abdul Ati al-Obeidi, Col Gaddafi’s deputy foreign minister, on his current visit to Greece: we support any initiative designed to bring about genuine dialogue and resolution between all sides, thereby allowing full attention to be focused on meeting the health and humanitarian needs effectively rather than increasing them through prolonged conflict.

I would be more than happy to discuss this with you.

Yours sincerely

Frank Boulton MD, FRCPE, FRCPaS
Chair MEDACT Board of Trustees
CC Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP Secretary of State for Defence