

## **A Time for Wise Heads**

If you have been watching the evening television or reading a newspaper over the past two weeks then you will know what is dominating the world news. The crisis in Syria has been tearing that country apart with tens of thousands of civilians killed, millions forced to flee to neighbouring countries and world leaders deeply divided on the question of 'what to do'?

The tragedy taking place in Syria and brought to television and computer screens each day shows the level of human suffering that governments and people bring to one another. There is no excuse for the bloodshed and the murder of innocent people particularly the young. Sadly, there appears no end soon to the conflict and the likelihood is that thousands more shall be killed before the fighting finally stops.

Syria is an ancient country steeped in history and tradition. Located at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, Syria is a country of rich coastal farmland, high inland mountains and vast expanses of desert. The country's capital, Damascus, is one of the oldest cities on earth. For the past forty years the nation has been ruled by the al-Assad family with the support of the military. The current turmoil that has embraced the country started in 2011 as part of a wider movement called the Arab Spring with people across the Arab world demanding greater freedom and political change. In response to the demonstrations, Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, mobilised the army with the instruction to put down the protesters. This aim the army attempted to accomplish using deadly force.

Yet the army was not entirely successful. The protesters rallied and formed pockets of resistance to fight the military. In time a Free Syrian Army was established with street protesters taking up arms and joined by foreign insurgents. The conflict escalated, the fighting became fiercer and the threat of all-out civil war a real possibility. Syria today is in turmoil.

Three weeks ago news was emerging of an attack on a residential district of Damascus that involved chemicals possibly chemical weapons. International news agencies reported that there were at least 300 deaths with some putting the figure closer to 1,500. It was unclear who had used the chemicals although most pointed the finger at Government troops rather than the rebels. The United Nations sent in a team of inspectors to confirm if chemicals had been used although they were not instructed to find out who was to blame for the attack.

The inspectors have now left Damascus and preparing a report for the United Nations.

In the meantime, certain world leaders have decided that enough is enough. Their view is that strong action must be taken against al-Assad and the Syrian Government to show that the use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated. Other world leaders have a different viewpoint, namely, to wait for the UN Inspectors to complete their report and the United Nations Security Council to decide on what action would be appropriate.

Those nations that propose an immediate military response against Syria include the United States, France and Saudi Arabia. The countries that favour waiting until the United Nations presents its findings include Russia and China. By and large, world leaders fall into one or other of these two camps. Frustrated by what he sees as a lack of action on the part of the world community, President Obama of the United States might decide to act alone and possibly without the approval of the United Nations.

Tomorrow is a critical day. President Obama will ask the US Congress for its support for an attack on the Syrian military. However, if he was not to get that support he might still press ahead with an attack. In the meantime, the world and Syria must wait and see what unfolds.

This is a tense time and requires wise heads. An unwise move or an action that goes wrong would have serious consequences for peace, trade and international relations. Tensions between the leaders of the USA and Russia are at their highest for many years. It is also a time for others to step up and push for a peaceful and political solution to the crisis. Two world leaders who could take a lead and voice their concerns are the President of China and the Prime Minister of India. China and India will be major players in international affairs as the 21st Century proceeds and the world waits for both countries to show leadership and take their place on the world stage.

In the meantime, the people of Syria are suffering terribly from a conflict that has brought their country to its knees.

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