ANDREW MARR: I’m joined now by the International Development Secretary, Andrew Mitchell. Welcome.

ANDREW MITCHELL: Good morning.

ANDREW MARR: You I think have been talking to the ICRC at the sort of highest level. What’s the mood there about this terrible situation in Homs?

ANDREW MITCHELL: Well the situation is extremely bleak. I spoke to Jacob Kellenberger, the Head of the International Red Cross in Geneva, last night. And the problem is that there is very limited access. It’s extremely difficult for the ICRC and the Syrian Red Crescent to operate on the ground, it’s very dangerous, and it’s extremely difficult for them too to get people out.
ANDREW MARR:
We’ve been talking a lot this morning about the journalists who’ve been killed and still caught up in all of this. But of course an awful lot of people there who are not journalists, who are injured, who desperately need help.

ANDREW MITCHELL:
Well there’s evidence on the ground of journalists very bravely prioritising women with children who’ve been caught up in the fighting and wounded, saying that they should get out first. There’s also evidence on the ground of people infiltrating the Syrian Red Crescent who are not part of the Red Crescent and posing an additional danger for those coming out; and also you’ve got evidence of those who have come out who have been in hospital and have been treated, who have then been beaten up afterwards by the Syrian Security Forces. So the position on the ground is extremely complex, dangerous and difficult.

ANDREW MARR:
And so, to follow that up, people who are trapped are worried that if they try to get out, they will simply be grabbed by Assad’s people and beaten up or worse?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
They are. There’s evidence on the ground that the Red Crescent … people have been posing as Red Crescent who are not in fact Red Crescent. So you can see how in this situation it’s very difficult for the International Red Cross with whom we are working, the World Food Programme to get help to those who need it. This morning some twenty thousand families are being fed thanks to British support - support that we channel through the International Red Cross down to the Red Crescent.

ANDREW MARR:
There’s the British photographer Paul Conroy there. There’s of course Marie Colvin’s body as well. What is the British Government doing to try and help in those situations?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
Well we are doing everything we possibly can. The Foreign Office have been seeking
to negotiate with the Syrian authorities. Our ambassador in Damascus is engaged in trying to do just that.

ANDREW MARR:
Is there any kind of connection, any kind of conversation actually happening?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
It’s extremely difficult and the conversations are patchy. You’ve seen in Tunis an effort by nearly seventy countries to try and bring some order to this desperate situation. This is an evil regime which has turned its guns on its own people. It’s despicable what is happening and we will hold them to account in every way we can for the human rights abuses that are going on.

ANDREW MARR:
A lot of people will say you know around that part of the world, never mind more widely, there are lots of wealthy and very, very well armed countries who are outraged about what is happening in Syria. Is there nothing more that can be done either to arm the rebels or even to start to put people in?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
We need to stop the fighting, not boost it in any way at all. The absolutely critical thing is that the Assad regime should sit down and negotiate a Syrian led, Syrian owned solution to the problems inside Syria. The International Community would support that very strongly. The trouble is of course that the International Community is not speaking with one voice because of the action taken in the Security Council particularly by the Russians.

ANDREW MARR:
There seems to be very little that can be done about that, but is also part of this a fear on the part of the British Government and others about what might follow the collapse, the disorderly collapse of the Assad regime? In other words, just because they’re rebels, it doesn’t mean they’re all good guys that we want to see running Syria.
ANDREW MITCHELL:  
Well everything we are doing is to attempt to secure a proper political process in which all the different parties in Syria can join to bring an end to the bloodshed and violence which characterises Syria today.

ANDREW MARR:  
Is there any possibility do you think where we’ll see outside troops under UN flags or whatever going into Syria?

ANDREW MITCHELL:  
I don’t think that is the answer. I don’t think it’s remotely practical at the moment. I think the key thing is to stop the fighting and to get the different parties to negotiate. And, above all, it is Assad who bears the responsibility for effecting that.

ANDREW MARR:  
And just finally on Homs where so much of the worst stuff seems to be happening. Any chance of kind of pushing a corridor in there to allow aid to go in and the wounded and desperate to get out?

ANDREW MITCHELL:  
Well that is what we are demanding. We are demanding unfettered access for the humanitarian agencies who are there on the ground. These are enormously brave people, these aid workers who are working in Homs, and they are needs based. They’re not taking sides. They’re seeking to help those who are caught up and wounded in the fighting, many of whom are very young children, and we demand unfettered access for them so that they can carry out this vital work.

ANDREW MARR:  
Are you hearing anything back at all from the Syrians about this, the government?

ANDREW MITCHELL:  
Well the position is very confused for the reasons that I said. People don’t trust the Syrian authorities at all and there’s very strong evidence why they shouldn’t trust
ANDREW MARR:
Yeah.

ANDREW MITCHELL:
But we continue to push in every way we possibly can for this unfettered access, and indeed for dialogue and a political process to begin as soon as possible.

ANDREW MARR:
Let me ask you about the other big conference of the week in your area, which was Somalia. Many people ask, given all the problems around the world, why Britain is hosting yet another great conference on Somalia. Has it really achieved much?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
Well I think there is the possibility that Somalia will turn the page as a result of the processes set in place at the conference. We want a Somalian owned and led and directed process on the ground, supported by all the regional powers and by the International Community and the United Nations, and there is some evidence that that will happen. But we should be very clear. I see the extraordinary article …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I was going to bring … Well the Observer alleges on its front page, its front page splash story, that behind all of this is what it calls a “secret high stakes dash” for oil in Somalia, and that you know British companies and the British Government basically wants Somalian oil and that’s what’s behind this conference.

ANDREW MITCHELL:
I award the journalist who wrote that story the prize for the most cynical piece of journalism this century. The engagement by Britain in Somalia was led by the fact that we were, all of us in the cabinet, appalled at the dreadful effects of the famine where tens of thousands of children under five were starving to death as a result of what was going on in Somalia and a determination by the British Government to play its part in trying to bring order and stability to a very disadvantaged and difficult part
of the world. That is why the Prime Minister called the conference. It was I think the right time to do it, and we did it because we are horrified by the dreadful effects of the famine, the lives of people in Somalia where a girl is more likely to die having a baby than to complete her primary schooling. But also of course Somalia in all its dysfunctionality is a threat to …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So there’s no commercial imperative in any of this?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
(over) There’s none, none whatsoever. Of course, of course if oil is found and developed, we want that oil to work for the benefit of the Somali people, but the British Government’s development efforts are engaged to make sure that the money is accounted for, spent transparently, and works for the benefit of Somalis.

ANDREW MARR:
Quite a lot of Conservative MPs rather resent the fact that your department is kind of buffered and proofed against the cuts that are happening elsewhere and ask whether all the money is being well spent and have been pointing particularly to reports that the Indians don’t actually want the aid that we’re giving them. And, after all, India’s a country which can apparently afford more and more nuclear weapons and a space programme and all the rest of it. Why should we be giving money to India?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
Well let me just make it clear, first of all, that in the very difficult economic circumstances which the coalition inherited, of course this is a difficult argument. We think it’s the right thing to do. We think it’s part of Britain’s DNA to be generous to people who are in very extreme circumstances. And of course our development budget transformed - there’s literally been a revolution in the way Britain does aid and development - transformed to focus first of all on conflict, which is the key incubator of poverty, and then on the fact that it is economic growth and the private sector and entrepreneurialism which helps people lift themselves out of poverty.

ANDREW MARR:
Surely it should be for the relatively wealthy now Indian Government to deal with Indian problems; not for us?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
Well the Indian programme has been completely transformed. This is the first year since the Second World War where India is not our largest programme. We focus only on the very poorest areas. Half of the Indian development budget now goes into pro-poor private sector investment, which has the characteristics of a sovereign wealth fund, so that is an investment from Britain but for Britain as well. And India has one of the largest anti-poverty programmes in the world. Our technical assistance has assisted Indian money and Indian funding, which is more than 95 per cent of all the funding, to get 60 million children …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Sorry …

ANDREW MITCHELL:
… into school in the last five years.

ANDREW MARR:
Which is wonderful. I don’t understand the sort of pro-poor thing. Does that mean that this is investment that somehow will come back to Britain? Investment in what?

ANDREW MITCHELL:
(over) Yes it does. It is. We are trying to ensure through organisations like CDC, other funds as well where British taxpayers’ money is deployed, that we invest and show that the effectiveness and the magic of the private sector in driving up living standards. And this is an investment which comes back to the UK through, as I say, many of the characteristics of a sovereign wealth fund. It’s an investment in pro-poor trading and development in India.

ANDREW MARR:
These are small businesses, are they?
ANDREW MITCHELL:
These are small and medium enterprises, they are social funds. But they come back to the United Kingdom in an increasing extent in our budget, and that is good for prosperity in India and good for prosperity in Britain. And after all, you know our children have come into a world of work where they don’t get the pensions that their forebears got …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) No.

ANDREW MITCHELL:
… where they have to pay for their own education, where they see an enormous mountain of debt. The development budget is an investment in the future prosperity of countries like India. It’s also an investment in our prosperity and it offers a chance in what will be one of the biggest markets in the world for the next generation to really gain from that.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Let me turn finally to a domestic story. You go through the papers one by one today, virtually all of them say roughly the same thing, which is that the Health Bill will go through, but that Andrew Lansley has failed to sell it properly and is in deep, deep political trouble with the Prime Minister.

ANDREW MITCHELL:
Well I think anyone who knows and has worked with the Prime Minister and Andrew Lansley knows their deep and abiding love and respect and commitment to the National Health Service. I don’t think there’s anyone who - in politics - who has spent as much time in understanding the NHS as Andrew Lansley has done.

ANDREW MARR:
But these have hardly been well sold reforms, have they? I mean people don’t understand them at all.

ANDREW MITCHELL:
Well I think all of us - not just Andrew - all of us have to do better in explaining why these reforms are taking place. But these reforms stem from an absolute and total commitment to the National Health Service - to making it better and ensuring at a time when people are living much longer, which is great, where the cost of medicines is increasing, we get a hundred pence out of every pound of taxpayers’ money we spend.

ANDREW MARR:
You’ve been around a long time in politics. You can tell that there’s some kind of operation against the Health Secretary going on in the papers and it probably comes from the centre of government.

ANDREW MITCHELL:
I have nothing but respect for the work that the Health Secretary is doing. I think he spent five years in opposition working out how to make the NHS better. All of us, not just the Health Secretary, have to be better at selling these reforms.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. Andrew Mitchell, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.

INTERVIEW ENDS