SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Now the civil war in Syria has been raging for two years now. The UN believes some 70,000 people have died and a million have fled the country as refugees. Last week America announced they were giving $60 million in what they’re calling “non-lethal aid” to Syrian opposition groups - the first direct supplies to the rebels. But what the rebels really want are weapons, so will they get them? Well I’m joined now by the Foreign Secretary William Hague. Good morning.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Good morning.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Sixty million dollars from America. Will you be matching that in some shape or form?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well we will be giving more assistance …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Money?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
… directly to the opposition, and I’ll announce in parliament this week what that will consist of. It will involve more equipment to try to help save lives in Syria because 70,000 (it may be a lot more now) who have been killed in this conflict principally by the Assad regime. So we will be doing more and we will have to steadily do more faced with this situation because the longer this goes on, the greater the danger that extremism takes hold, the greater the danger of destabilising neighbouring countries - I saw that for myself in Lebanon ten days ago - and the greater the extreme humanitarian distress involved. So we cannot just sit on the sidelines and watch those things.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
So Britain will basically be giving money, will be giving some money to match what America has done in order to provide non-lethal equipment.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well we will be doing more, and what we’re doing is coordinated yes with the United States and with our other allies. I’ve had a lot of discussions with John Kerry, the new Secretary of State, over the last week about this. We will be doing more and we will have to steadily do more if there is no diplomatic or political breakthrough. The situation in Syria now is too dangerous to the peace and security of that entire region and thereby of the world to ignore it, and of course we will continue to give enormous amounts to relieve humanitarian distress - we’re one of the leading countries in doing that - but we will have to do more to assist the opposition on the ground.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Okay you’ve used that word ‘more’ several times already and you’re not saying whether that translates into money. Could it possibly translate though into arms eventually?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
I don’t think we can rule that out for the future. I will not be announcing this week
arms to the Syrian opposition, and we’ve agreed in the European Union last week amendments to the arms embargo to allow us to send more, a wider range of non-lethal equipment that will do more to save lives and a wider range of technical assistance and advice.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
But this is military equipment, isn’t it though? You’re allowed to send now what sort of flat jackets, night vision goggles. You’re allowed to send vehicles that are in some way armoured to protect civilians.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
We can now send more. And you’ll understand that I’m going to make to parliament the details. That is …

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
*(over)* I know, I’m trying to get it out of you now.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
*(over)* Right now I’m feeling very strongly a minister’s making announcements to parliament. So we will be doing that and I don’t rule out anything for the future. If this is going to go on for months or years - it’s gone on for two years already - and more tens of thousands of people are going to die and countries like Iraq and Lebanon and Jordan are going to be destabilised, it’s not something we can ignore.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
No.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
I know people will say well why do we have to do anything or be involved at all, and these are the reasons and we can’t just sit it out in Syria.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
Okay, you can’t sit it out, but you say you will not rule out giving arms to the Syrian opposition. How do you ever know, if that happens, how do you know whose hands
those end up in because the opposition is not some homogenous group, is it?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well by the way I’m not saying that we are doing that.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) You haven’t ruled it out?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
(over) You asked me whether I would exclude that. And of course if ever we get into that situation, the risks of arms falling into the wrong hands, that’s one of the great constraints and that’s one of the reasons we don’t do it now of course. But these things are a balance of risk. You can reach the point eventually where humanitarian need is so great and the loss of life so great that you have to do something new in order to save lives. That’s why I don’t rule it out in the future.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You will of course have seen this interview this morning - President Assad, a very rare interview that he has given - and one he says …He talks about “bullying Britain”, doesn’t he? How Britain is “fanning the flames” and he says, “how can we expect them, Britain, to make the violence less while they want to send military supplies to the terrorists?”

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well this is a man presiding over this slaughter, you know, and the message for him is we, Britain, are the people sending food and shelter and blankets to help people driven from their homes and families in his name. We are the people sending medical supplies to try to look after people injured and abused by the soldiers working for this man, President Assad. And Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN Envoy, who’s a softly spoken diplomat, said this week that Assad thinks and is told by his inner circle that all of this is an international conspiracy, not the actual rebellion and revolt of his own people. So I think this will go down as one of the most delusional interviews that any national leader has given in modern times.
SOPHIE RAWORTH:
But he has a point though in one sense in that he says you know is this actually going to end the conflict. If we went down that path, if let’s say the rebels were armed, there’s no guarantee that would end the conflict at all, is there? Violence could meet violence and it could escalate.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well what I’m saying is we have to do what we can to save lives - lives that he is bringing to a terrible end - and of course we will never waiver in trying to seek a diplomatic and political solution to the situation in Syria. He has now had two years of opportunities to sit down in real dialogue and has refused every opportunity to do so, even though the National Coalition, their leader, the opposition leader, Mr al-Khatib, bravely offered direct dialogue with the Assad regime. They haven’t taken up that offer. But we will never stop pursing that. There isn’t a military only solution to the solution in Syria. The Russian Foreign Minister will be here in London in the next ten days and of course we will have another major discussion about Syria to see whether we can make some diplomatic breakthrough. But there is no sign of that at the moment, hence we have to do more to try to protect people, protect civilian life in Syria and in neighbouring countries.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Okay, well let’s turn to the subject of Eastleigh. What went wrong for the Tories?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well I think something went wrong there for all of the main political parties. We must never …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Not for UKIP. (laughs) They’re not the main ones obviously, but …

WILLIAM HAGUE:
We must always take … we must always of course take seriously people’s concerns and by-election results, but the statistics of by-elections, as you know, can be argued in every direction. I was elected in a by-election 24 years ago and the result in my
constituency in the following five general elections has borne no resemblance at all to that by-election result. So it’s dangerous to extrapolate from by-elections. But, as the Prime Minister said in his article this morning, there are people who know the country was going downhill under Labour. That’s why they’re not voting Labour, by the way, and they’re very clearly not …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) So you’re brushing this off then?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
No.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Eastleigh, kind of brushing it off?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
No, my point is …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Really? Complacent?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
We’re not brushing it off. There are people who know that and believe that, but they are impatient for us to sort these things out and I think what we have to do is make sure we follow up and communicate properly the things that we are succeeding in as a government. And there are many of those. Just this week the immigration figures came out, down by a third. Welfare spending has been brought under control - two million people lifted out of income tax at the lower end of the earnings scale.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) But you know full well …

WILLIAM HAGUE:
(over) These are very important things.
SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) … you know full well that the criticism of the Conservatives right now is that they are not in touch with their grassroots. That is what you are not in touch with - your core supporters. I mean there’s all kinds of coverage, as you know, in the papers today. I mean one of the … over the weekend. You know put simply - this is just one newspaper - “put simply electors are sick and tired of a gilded, out of touch, metropolitan elite which seems more concerned with posturing over gay marriage, overseas aid and windmills than helping those whose disposable income is shrinking every month.” That is the main problem, isn’t it?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well I don’t think it is because, as David Cameron has argued in his article today, the Conservative Party must stay on the common ground, in touch and representing …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) Not the middle ground?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
(over) No not the middle ground because this is not about triangulating a point in politics between us and other parties, and it’s certainly not about a lurch in any direction. It is about making a success of these things that this government in the most challenging circumstances of any government in modern times, given the inheritance that we were left, has set about doing - bringing down the deficit by a quarter, bringing down the rate of business tax quite sharply, freezing council tax for 3 years, having more apprenticeships than we’ve ever had before.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Okay …

WILLIAM HAGUE:
We’ve got a million more private sector jobs in the last few years.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
But look at what UKIP … I mean they got a lot of … Well you know some of the vote was protest, but a lot of people seem to have been drawn to UKIP because of the issue of immigration - the fears particularly about the number of Romanians and Bulgarians who are going to be coming to this country as of next year. You’ve got figures, haven’t you? You’ve got estimates. How many do you actually think are going to be turning up or is it all scaremongering?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
No, we don’t have estimates on that. What we do have …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
There’s no government estimate?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
The figures are the figures that came out this week - that immigration is down by a third after a completely open door policy operated by the …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) I’m talking about Romanians and Bulgarians.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Yes, I know, but there are no secret estimates of that. We do have the actual figures of what’s happening to immigration and it’s coming down, thanks to the policies of the government. Now in a by-election, of course, people can have a bit of an indulgence, but a general election is a choice. And at the next general election, do people want a government that has really brought down immigration, this one, or a Labour government that threw open the doors completely?

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Okay, let me just ask you two points there. Okay, first of all, Romanians and Bulgarians - are you saying to me you have absolutely no idea; there are no assessments, you have no clue how many people, because obviously Migration Watch are saying quarter of a million people over the next five years?
WILLIAM HAGUE:
I don’t think anybody can give you an accurate forecast of that …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
_over_ That’s rather worrying, isn’t it?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
… because the European Union, of course a fundamental principle of that is the free movement of people and British people benefit enormously from that. So yes we will have that, but we will also be careful to make sure that benefit tourism comes to an end. That has to be tackled so that people are not drawn to one … not drawn to our country or any country in particular just by being attracted by the benefit system.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
So Migration Watch’s figures, so you think they’re just … it’s impossible to guess; it’s nonsense to …?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
I think it is guesswork.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
But that is really worrying. So you have no clue how many people are going to come to this country as of next year?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
I’m saying that it would be guesswork to come to such a figure. The important thing is to make sure that people are not drawn artificially into the United Kingdom from any of the countries of the European Union. Most Romanian and Bulgarian people who live in other countries don’t live in Britain. That’s not where their diaspora has gone over recent years. That can be of some reassurance to people. But of course there isn’t a … there’s no magical secret figure. What we should continue to do is to bring down the total of immigration into this country, which we are doing …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And put people off coming … and put people off coming? There’s a story in one of the papers this morning saying that you know new immigrants will potentially have their access to the NHS limited. Is that the kind of thing you’re looking at?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well it’s important there aren’t artificial perverse incentives, if you like, for people to come to the UK - to come for that reason.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
So you are looking at that?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
So yes we are looking in government at what more we can do to make sure that is controlled, that that is fair across Europe. And I think people would expect us to do that; that’s absolutely right - again something that never happened under the last government. And the next general election will be a choice between tackling these sorts of things or the last government that never did any of it.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And benefits as well - you’d curb benefits for new immigrants?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well benefit tourism can’t be allowed. We are of course getting the whole benefit system under control. We’ve introduced (against Labour opposition) the cap on benefits, so that no family on benefits can receive more than the average household can receive by going out to work. These are our essential reforms. Our reforms of housing benefit, essential reforms of the benefit system. The next general election is a choice between do you want to go back to Ed Balls running the economy and no discipline on these things at all, or do you want yes the difficult challenges, the hard work that we’re having to put in to make these changes? And I think people want those changes.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And difficult challenges looking ahead: Spending Reviews, the Budget, with the
Spending Review defence cuts, welfare cuts. I mean do you think welfare cuts, that is the way to go?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
You’ll have to wait for the Spending Review. Clearly we’ve worked hard and Iain Duncan Smith has done a brilliant job bringing the benefit system under control. Philip Hammond’s been doing a brilliant job balancing the books for the first time in a long time in the Ministry of Defence.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) And he’s made it clear he can take no more.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well we will … of course ministers will discuss the spending round, the next spending round over the next few weeks and months. So any announcements on that, you will have to wait for. But my colleagues are doing an outstanding piece of work in making sure this country can live within its means. We’ve brought down the deficit by a quarter. And we’ve got to go on doing that and we won’t be diverted from doing that by the by-elections or local elections. We can’t be.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
(over) Let me just ask you about another big story in the papers this morning, the European Convention on Human Rights. Are we potentially leaving that? That will be something that will be in the Conservative manifesto?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
We’ve already sought reform of the European Court of Human Rights (with some success) over the last couple of years. I think the stories you’ve seen today are speculation about a future manifesto. And that manifesto is a couple of years away, so we’re getting well ahead of ourselves on that.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
So not true?
WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well it’s speculation about a future manifesto, so I can’t give you more than that.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
And I must just ask you one more thing about Mali overnight and the reports that the leader, the man who was behind this Algerian crisis at the gas plant has been killed. Is that a significant step towards getting the sort of terrorism in North Africa under control?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
It would be a blow to terrorism. These are reports from Chadian soldiers who’ve been doing a lot of the fighting in Northern Mali. We can’t absolutely confirm this at the moment. I stress that. It would be a blow to terrorism and to the criminal network around this man and other people, but it doesn’t mean that the problems of Mali would be at an end. There’s a lot to do to promote a political process in Mali - elections, legitimate government and so on - and that work has to go on.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Foreign Secretary, thank you very much.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS