

Outgoing UN envoy makes new appeal to Syria's warring sides

Author:

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GENEVA: The outgoing UN envoy for Syria is appealing on the country's warring sides to form a committee that would negotiate a new constitution as a way of bringing the Mideast nation out of its protracted civil war.

Staffan de Mistura says there are disagreements over a "few names" of those who would be on that committee.

He said "agreement, particularly on the side of" the regime of President Bashar Assad was needed.

De Mistura said on Friday that his Dec. 20 briefing to the UN Security Council could be his last. He had originally planned to leave in November.

De Mistura appeared alongside China's special envoy Xie Xiaoyan and said he was seeking Chinese help to convince Syria's regime that it's "worth it to make an effort."

Turkey and the US have agreed to speed up efforts to put in place an agreement on Manbij by the end of the year, said a working committee between the NATO allies.

Earlier this year, Turkey and the US reached a deal over Manbij, after months of disagreement, under which the Kurdish YPG militia is to completely withdraw from the town. Ankara, which considers the YPG a terrorist organization, says the withdrawal has yet to happen.

During Friday's meeting the two sides also agreed to continue to work on joint planning with regard to other areas, as mentioned in the Manbij roadmap.

Meanwhile, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have broken into an eastern holdout of Daesh on the Iraqi border.

A Kurdish-led alliance, backed by airstrikes of the US-led coalition, has been battling to oust Daesh from the pocket in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor since September.

Heavy clashes

But the SDF troops suffered a series of setbacks, including due to a vicious fightback by extremists and bad weather that impeded visibility.

On Thursday, an SDF commander said the alliance had managed to break into the pocket and wrest part of its main town from Daesh.

“Heavy clashes are ongoing inside the town of Hajin, after our forces advanced inside and started to control some of its neighborhoods,” said Redur Khalil.

The SDF opened up humanitarian corridors out of the beleaguered pocket, allowing more than 1,000 civilians – mostly woman and children – to flee from Hajin in the past few days.

Khalil accused Daesh of using civilians as human shields, and said the corridors would remain open.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said the SDF launched an attack on Tuesday and than dozens of families had managed to flee.

The attack was backed by the heaviest shelling and airstrikes by the US-led coalition since the start of the offensive on the Hajin pocket on Sept. 10, Observatory chief Rami Abdelrahman said.

Since Tuesday, 34 terrorists including three suicide bombers, and 17 SDF fighters have been killed in the fighting, the Observatory said.

In almost three months of battle, more than 820 terrorists and more than 480 US-backed fighters have been killed, the monitor says.

More than 300 civilians have been killed in that period, its says, though the coalition has repeatedly said it did not target non-combatants.

Daesh overran large parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014, declaring a “caliphate” across territories it controlled.

But various offensives in both countries have routed Daesh from most of that land, crushing its dreams of statehood.

In Syria, Daesh retains a presence in the vast Badia desert that stretches to the Iraqi border, as well as the pocket under attack around Hajin.

“The liberation of Hajin will not signify the end of Daesh,” Khalil said, warning it would retain sleeper cells. “Operations to expel them will still last a long time.”



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[US accuses Russia of lying on Syria attack to undermine truce](#)

Fri, 2018-12-07 21:59

WASHINGTON: The United States accused Russia on Friday of helping fabricate a story about chemical weapons use by Syrian rebels as a pretext to undermine a shaky truce.

Russia's defense ministry said rebels fired grenades containing chlorine on November 24 on the regime-held city of Aleppo, with Syrian state media reporting that around 100 Syrians were hospitalized for breathing difficulties.

The United States said it had "credible information" that the account was false and that Russian and Syrian forces instead had fired tear gas.

"The United States is deeply concerned that pro-regime officials have maintained control of the attack site in its immediate aftermath, allowing them to potentially fabricate samples and contaminate the site before a

proper investigation of it by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,” State Department spokesman Robert Palladino said in a statement.

“We caution Russia and the regime against tampering with the suspected attack site and urge them to secure the safety of impartial, independent inspectors so that those responsible can be held accountable,” he said.

He said that Russia and Syria were “using it as an opportunity to undermine confidence in the ceasefire in Idlib,” the last stronghold of rebels and extremists fighting President Bashar Al-Assad.

Russia responded to the purported attack with air raids on Idlib, throwing into question a truce reached in mid-September.

The United States – along with other Western governments, the United Nations and human rights groups – have repeatedly pointed to chemical attacks by Assad’s forces.

A sarin gas attack in April 2017 in the town of Khan Sheikhun killed 83 people, according to the UN, leading the United States to strike a Syrian air base with cruise missiles as punishment.

Russia, the top international backer of Assad, and the Syrian government both denied the incident, saying footage of suffering victims including children was staged.



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[UN: No time limit for Yemen peace talks in Stockholm](#)

Fri, 2018-12-07 19:26

LONDON: There is no time limit for the Yemen peace talks taking place in Stockholm, the United Nations said Friday.

The international organisation also said that the current phase of the consultations focused on confidence building.

UN-sponsored peace talks between Yemen's legitimate government and the Houthi militia started on Thursday in Sweden.

The two sides agreed on Thursday to free thousands of prisoners, in what UN mediator Martin Griffiths called a hopeful start to the first peace talks in two years to end a war that has pushed millions of people to the verge of starvation.

Griffiths wants a deal on reopening the airport, shoring up the central bank and securing a truce in Hodeidah, the country's main port, held by the Houthis and a focus of the war after the Arab coalition launched a campaign to capture it this year.

Sanaa airport, which has been bombed several times, is in Houthi territory but access is restricted by the Arab coalition, which controls the air space.

Yemen's government proposed reopening the Houthi-held airport in the capital Sanaa on condition planes are inspected in the airports of Aden or Sayun which are under its control, two government officials said on Friday.

Marwan Dammaj, Yemen's minister of culture in the internationally recognised government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, told Reuters Sanaa airport should be re-opened to put "an end to the people's suffering regarding transportation".

"But it should be a domestic airport from where Yemenis can go to Aden and then leave to international destinations," added Dammaj, a member of the government delegation.

Hamza Al Kamali, another member of the delegation, said airplanes must stop in airports in the southern city of Aden or Sayun, east of the capital, for inspection before leaving Yemen.

The Houthi delegation head at the peace talks, Mohammed Abdusalam, rejected

the proposal. "The airport should be opened in accordance to international standards, and we do not accept inspections," Abdusalam told Al Jazeera television.



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Yemen military offensive 'still open if Houthis reject Hodeida pullout' British ambassador to Yemen posts video in Arabic giving updates on Stockholm talks

[Rudderless Lebanon could miss out on aid, France warns](#)

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Fri, 2018-12-07 13:31

BEIRUT: France on Friday warned Lebanon it could lose the international community's goodwill and much-needed investments if it takes any longer to form a government.

Lebanon's economy has looked on the brink of collapse for some time but a Paris conference dubbed CEDRE in April earned it \$11 billion in aid pledges. Polls held the following month gave Saad Hariri a new term as prime minister but Lebanon's fractious political class has since failed to agree on a government line-up.

Seven months on, a breakthrough does not seem imminent and French Ambassador to Lebanon Bruno Foucher warned that Lebanon stood to lose a lot.

"We deeply regret that our Lebanese friends are not able to agree on a government," he said during a press conference held on a French frigate making a stop in Beirut.

The amounts pledged in Paris were unexpectedly high and other conferences have also mustered support for Lebanon, whose economy has been in a downward spiral for years due to political divisions and corruption.

The outbreak of violence in neighbouring Syria in 2011 added to those woes, keeping tourists away and triggering a massive influx of refugees that has strained public services.

"The lack of a government in Lebanon means running the risk that this dynamic in the international community is lost," Foucher said.

"That moment could pass."

The French envoy explained that a new government was needed to undertake the programme contained in the CEDRE plan and warned that investors would not wait for forever.

"There are other countries that may need international assistance," he said. Government formation is often a drawn-out process in Lebanon, where a complex governing system seeks to maintain a precarious balance of power between its various political and religious communities.



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[Yemen military offensive 'still open if Houthis reject Hodeida pullout'](#)

Fri, 2018-12-07 14:25

STOCKHOLM: A government offensive on Yemen's Hodeida remains an option if Houthi militias refuse to withdraw from the port city, a minister said on Friday, as the negotiators met for UN-brokered talks.

"We are now in negotiations in response to calls by the international community, the UN and the UN envoy. We are still looking into means toward peace," said Agriculture Minister Othman Al-Mujalli.

"But if they (the Houthis) are not responsive, we have many options, including that of military decisiveness," he told reporters in response to a question on the Houthi-occupied city. "And we are ready."

Talks between Yemen's government and Houthis, linked to Iran, opened on Thursday in Sweden.

While the days leading up to the gathering saw the government and Houthis agreeing on a prisoner swap deal and the evacuation of wounded insurgents for medical treatment in Oman, both parties traded threats as the talks began. The two sides have not yet met face-to-face.

Talks are expected to focus the fate of Hodeida, a city on Yemen's western coastline that houses the country's most valuable port.

The government accuses the Houthis of arms smuggling through Hodeida – also a conduit for 90 percent of food imports – and has demanded the militias withdraw from the port.

Al-Mujalli said the government was not open to negotiations on control of the port. The UN, he said, could play a "supervisory" role, but he rejected the idea of placing management of the port in the hands of a third party.

UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths urged both parties to spare Hodeida.

"It's the humanitarian pipeline to the rest of the country," he said.

Negotiations also cover a prisoner swap between the two sides and the potential reopening of Sanaa airport, located in the Houthi-occupied capital and largely shut down for three years.

The government is demanding planes be searched in one of two government-controlled areas – Aden or Sayoun – en route to or from Sanaa.

"We are keen on the opening of Sanaa airport, and we demand the opening of Sanaa airport and we know that the Yemeni citizen should have the right to

reach any country in the world through Sanaa airport,” said Abdulaziz Jabari, a presidential adviser and member of a Yemeni government delegation at the talks.

“But... we are looking into who will supervise Sanaa airport,” Jabari said, adding that the airport could serve as a hub for domestic flights. But Houthis on Friday turned down the government demand. “Sanaa airport is an international airport,” said Houthi representative Abdulmalik Al-Ajri.



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