

Syria: Amid 'promising' diplomatic steps, UN envoy says hostilities continue on the ground

22 May 2017 – Despite the “promising” steps in Syria that followed diplomatic talks in the Kazakh capital, Astana – a nationwide ceasefire announced last December, and the de-escalation zones created inside Syria to deepen that effort – a United Nations envoy today warned of ongoing hostilities between the Government and armed opposition groups in several areas, such as Hama, Homs, and Damascus.

“Astana produced, in my modest opinion, a promising step,” said Staffan de Mistura during a briefing to the Security Council in New York via video-teleconference from Geneva. A meeting in Kazakh capital, led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, saw agreement on a ceasefire between warring parties in Syria in late December 2016.

The Astana talks began shortly after to bolster the ceasefire agreement brokered by the so-called “guarantor” countries. Five months later, a deal was struck to set up “de-escalation zones” in Syria to prevent incidents and military confrontation between the warring parties. These zones are expected to also give greater humanitarian access to the 6.3 million people still living the country today.

And while the Astana process – which led to a “significant drop in violence,” including in aerial bombing – had been “good news,” Mr. de Mistura told the Council that the “not so good news” is that: “We have received reports of ongoing hostilities between the Government and armed opposition groups in areas such as Hama, Homs and Damascus. Some of these areas seem to be outside of the current de-escalation zones.”

Meanwhile, the Special Envoy said the Government of Syria has made some significant advances against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh), but he also cautioned about the “continued activities of Security Council-listed terrorist groups.”

He also gave an update on the sixth round of the [intra-Syrian talks](#), which wrapped up late last week in Geneva and have lately been held parallel to the Astana talks, whose aim to seek a political solution to the conflict.

“There is still a great deal of work to be done. We are aware that important gaps remain between the parties on major issues,” Mr. de Mistura said, explaining that his team has now prepared the ground for a “real negotiation,” which he hopes will be possible before too long. For the first time, he said, he has received the consent of all parties to engage at an expert level. He said he was also pleased that all parties were receptive the UN convening a seventh round of talks, which is intended to take place sometime in June.