

AS DELIVERED

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United Nations Deputy Special Envoy for Syria
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
29 January 2020

Mr. President (Amb. Dang Dinh Quy, Vietnam),

1. It is an honor for me to brief this Council today. The Special Envoy is in Damascus where he is seeking to de-escalate the situation in the northwest and to renew progress in the UN-facilitated political process. Let me update the Council on where we stand today.
2. First on the political track, the Special Envoy continues to engage the Syrian parties and key international stakeholders to unlock progress in the difficult path out of the Syrian conflict and towards the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254.
3. One aspect of this effort is the Constitutional Committee, which has been established and has been convened twice in Geneva. It comprises representatives nominated by the Government of Syria, representatives nominated by the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and a Middle Third of civil society.
4. As the Special Envoy briefed you last month, disputes between the Co-Chairs over the agenda prevented the meeting of the Small Body during the second round.
5. The Special Envoy and Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Moallem agreed in Damascus today on the importance of strict observance of the agreed Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure. They also discussed all issues related to the overall political process.
6. After communications with the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Negotiations Commission in late December and talks today in Damascus with the Co-Chair nominated by the Government of Syria, the Special Envoy is working to narrow the differences and hopes to be in a position to convene the Constitutional Committee shortly. He hopes the Constitutional Committee's sessions will continue with a steady rhythm in the months ahead. There is a need to build trust and confidence, which can contribute to opening the door to a broader political process.
7. Meanwhile, I am pleased to officially inform the Security Council that for the first time the working group on the release of detainees/abductees, the handover of bodies and the identification of missing persons comprising Iran, Russia, Turkey and the United Nations

will convene, as part of an ongoing rotation, in Geneva later in February. We realize progress on this file is not easy but it would be of enormous significance to so many Syrians to see the pace and scale of releases increase. Special Envoy Pedersen underlined the importance of this issue in his consultations today with the Government of Syria.

Mr. President,

8. Let us recall however that there is a grave and, in many ways, worsening situation on the ground. The alarming scale of military operations in the north-west has resulted in devastating humanitarian consequences for the three million people in Idlib area, including hundreds of thousands of displaced; reported airstrikes, including on civilian infrastructure; mutual shelling; and civilian deaths in and around the north-west. We reiterate the Secretary-General's call for an immediate ceasefire and continue to press all parties for a sustained de-escalation for the entire north-west, along with all other areas of Syria, and remind all parties of their obligations to protect civilians. Countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups is imperative. It is true that HTS and other proscribed groups, including foreign fighters, are a major force in Idlib. As the Special Envoy has stressed, countering such groups must be through an approach that ensures the protection of civilians and fully respects international humanitarian and human rights law, and is only likely to be effective with genuine cooperation among relevant players.
9. In the north-east, the various ceasefires and understandings that were reached continue to provide relative calm. However, the situation remains turbulent, with some impact on civilians: in recent weeks armed activity has continued, as well as other tensions, including between international actors. A sustainable arrangement, inclusive of all actors and in the framework of respect for Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, remains imperative.
10. Protracted tensions in southern Syria also remain a source of concern.
11. De-escalating violence, leading to a cessation of hostilities, across all Syria, is more critical than ever. And the presence of five foreign armies operating in Syria is a reminder of the continuing dangers the crisis presents to international peace and security and the challenges to the restoration of Syria's sovereignty.
12. You are aware of serious humanitarian challenges in Syria. Let me also stress that the economic situation of all Syrians, across all areas, has continued to sharply decline with a number of factors combining to increase the economic hardship facing the society. This was impressed upon us by the Syrian Women's Advisory Group, who convened in Geneva earlier this month. They shared firsthand experiences of the daily suffering of Syrians living with severe shortages of basic commodities. The WAB, the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, spoke of the suffering of Syrian women in this context, many of whom are now primary breadwinners and those facing heightened risks of violence and exploitation. We believe a broader process must deliver in this regard too.

13. In all his international engagements this past month – with valuable consultations with senior European, US, Arab and Turkish officials in Rome and Davos, and in wide-ranging and positive talks with the Foreign and Defense Ministers of Russia recently in Moscow - the Special Envoy has continued to stress the importance of them working together to support a broader process. Indeed, it is apparent from all his consultations that the constitutional committee is not sufficient to address the real concerns of all parties. There is a need for a broader process that builds trust and confidence step-by-step. It could develop with reciprocal and mutually reinforcing actions by Syrians and by outsiders as well, delivering tangible improvements for Syrians, towards establishing a safe, calm and neutral environment. Such an environment would also help give confidence to refugees for safe, voluntary and dignified refugee returns and to those who wish to support the reconstruction of a war-torn country. The Special Envoy believes there are modest openings to further pursue this work, and he will be doing so with deliberation and care. And this does still require genuine dialogue among key international players to deepen.

14. We continue to prioritize accommodating the full range of Syrian voices in the process. Last week I had the honor to welcome Syrians from inside and outside Syria to consultations of the Syrian Civil Society Support Room in Geneva. They pressed on humanitarian, socio-economic and political concerns, and stressed the need for maximum transparency and inclusivity in the political process. We will continue for our part as the United Nations to consult widely and build bridges wherever we can.

Mr. President,

15. The Special Envoy will continue to press for an end the violence and work for resuming the Constitutional Committee and securing detainee releases. He will continue also to seek to unlock the kind of comprehensive political process that would result in a lasting political settlement, that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, and that respects and restores Syria's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and independence, in line with resolution 2254.