

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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British ambassador to Yemen posts video in Arabic giving updates on Stockholm talks
Yemen's warring parties agree to prisoner swap

[Syria president announces \\$9bn budget for 2019](#)

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Thu, 2018-12-06 17:51

DAMASCUS: Syria's president on Thursday announced a budget for 2019 of almost \$9 billion, of which around a third has been allocated to investment projects including in areas ravaged by the war.

Seven years into Syria's grinding civil war, the Damascus government has expelled rebels and extremists from large parts of the country with Russian military backing.

President Bashar Assad issued the budget after parliament passed the bill on Monday.

Next year's budget would amount to 3,882 billion Syrian pounds (\$8.9 billion, according to the official exchange rate), state news agency SANA said.

From that, 1,100 billion pounds (\$2.5 billion) would be allocated to "investment," SANA said.

Finance Minister Mamun Hamdan said 443 billion pounds (\$1 billion) would go to "investment projects in liberated areas or to which the Syrian army brings back stability," SANA quoted him as saying.

The minister also said that 700 billion Syrian pounds (\$1.6 billion) would be spent on electricity projects, without mentioning in which areas, according to state television.

Hamdan told newspaper Al-Watan that the projected deficit for next year was 946 billion pounds (almost \$2.2 billion).

The regime this year expelled rebels and extremists from the capital's surroundings and the south of the country, bringing these areas back under its control.

It has also threatened to retake the northwestern region of Idlib on the Turkish border, but the area is for now protected by a shaky buffer zone deal struck in September between Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

The 2018 budget was of 3,187 billion pounds (\$7.3 billion).

Syria's war has killed 360,000 people and displaced millions since starting in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-regime protests.



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US-backed forces: Daesh security leader seized in Syria

[**Bahrain FM: Qatar has burned its bridges with GCC**](#)

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Thu, 2018-12-06 17:32

LONDON: Qatar has burned its bridges with the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and aligned itself with “enemies of the region like Iran,” Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid Al Khalifa has said.

In an interview with Asharq Al-Awsat, Al Khalifa described the Qatar crisis

as a very deep disagreement that has reached a point not seen before in rifts between GCC countries.

Al Khalifa added that he did not know how Qatar would return from this point, having distanced itself from other GCC countries after aligning itself with Iran.

“These issues do not indicate that Qatar will remain a member of the GCC, but we are dealing with this topic realistically,” he said.

The minister said that Qatar had “burned all ships of return to the Council,” and that a new agreement and system are needed in order to solve the crisis.

He also said that Doha should be scrutinized and put under a “microscope.”

Speaking ahead of the GCC summit set to be held in Riyadh on Sunday,

Al Khalifa said that the hostile policy pursued by Qatar against other GCC states is clear, notably Doha’s hostility toward Saudi Arabia.

He added that the most important topic to be discussed at the upcoming GCC summit is strategic military cooperation between GCC states, and that decisions will be made regarding this.



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