

Renewed push for peace as Western Sahara talks open in Geneva

Wed, 2018-12-05 22:15

GENEVA: The first UN-backed discussions on the disputed Western Sahara region since 2012 opened in Geneva on Wednesday, but expectations remained low, with the meeting seen as just a first step towards resuming dialogue.

Six years after direct talks broke down, Morocco and the Polisario Front, which fought a war over the region until a 1991 ceasefire, are taking part in two days of roundtable discussions along with Algeria and Mauritania.

UN envoy Horst Koehler, a former German president, is hosting the talks, which kicked off at the UN headquarters in Geneva on Wednesday afternoon. In his October invitation letter to the talks, Koehler insisted it was "time to open a new chapter in the political process".

The UN meanwhile has described the talks as "a first step towards a renewed negotiations process with the aim of reaching a just, lasting and mutually acceptable solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara."

A former Spanish colony, phosphate-rich Western Sahara sits on the western edge of the vast eponymous desert, stretching around 1,000 kilometres (600 miles) along the Atlantic coastline, a prime fishing region.

When Spain withdrew from the North African territory in 1975, Rabat sent thousands of people across the border and claimed it was an integral part of Morocco.

The following year the Polisario Front declared Western Sahara the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), with support from Algeria and Libya, and demanded a referendum on self-determination.

Since then 84 UN member states have recognised the SADR.

But a stalemate ensued, and Morocco built razor-wire-topped concentric sand walls in the desert that still ring 80 percent of the territory it controls. Under a 1991 ceasefire, the United Nations deployed a peacekeeping mission which has perpetuated the line of control, but the international community has long intended for a referendum to be held to decide the territory's status.

Rabat currently rejects any vote in which independence is an option, arguing that only granting autonomy is on the table and that this is necessary for regional security.

Awaiting a settlement, between 100,000 and 200,000 refugees live precariously in camps near the town of Tindouf in western Algeria, not far from the Moroccan and Western Sahara borders.

The last direct talks were launched by the UN in 2007 but collapsed five years later over the territory's status and the proposed referendum.

Koehler, who has led the diplomatic efforts since 2017, is hosting the foreign ministers of Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania on Wednesday, as well as a Polisario delegation headed by Khatri Addouh, the speaker of the Sahrawi parliament.

But the agenda for the meetings remains vague and the format has not been unanimously agreed.

Algeria wants to participate only as an "observer country", but Rabat considers it a "stakeholder" in the discussions, since Algiers is the Polisario's main backer.

In a statement issued Wednesday, Algiers said Foreign Minister Abdelkader Messahel has met with Koehler and reiterated his country's support for the process "in its capacity as a neighbouring country".

And while all sides signalled goodwill ahead of Wednesday's meeting, they did not budge from their positions.

King Mohammed VI has said he supports a "durable" political solution marked by a "spirit of compromise", but in a recent speech he insisted that Morocco would not yield on its "territorial integrity", including control over Western Sahara.

And key Polisario official Mhamed Khadad told AFP ahead of the talks that "everything can be negotiated except the inalienable and imprescriptible right of our people to self-determination."

Diplomats and others with insight into the process have meanwhile played down the prospect of any real breakthrough.

One diplomat stressed that the roundtable was "not a negotiation" but rather a meeting "that will make it possible to test the real will of the parties, and to determine if they should move forward" or not.

Observers meanwhile point to increased pressure on the sides to find a solution, after the UN Security Council recently adopted a US-drafted resolution to renew a small peacekeeping mission at the ceasefire line, but cut its mandate from 12 to six months.

Nour Bakr, with the non-profit Independent Diplomat which advises the Polisario Front, meanwhile called for more EU support for the process, lamenting that the bloc is negotiating major trade deals with Morocco that involve Western Sahara.

The Europeans "try to make a separation between having these trade deals and claiming to support the political process," he told AFP.

But "they are de facto recognising Morocco's sovereignty."



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UN welcomes moves to restart negotiations on Western Sahara
Morocco pushes development in disputed Western Sahara

[Yemen peace talks to start on Thursday in Sweden, say UN](#)

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Wed, 2018-12-05 16:53

RIMB0, Sweden: STOCKHOLM: Peace talks between Yemeni government representatives and a rebel delegation will begin on Thursday in Sweden, the UN announced.

"The (UN special envoy) would like to announce the restart of the intra-Yemeni political process in Sweden on 6 December 2018," UN envoy Martin

Griffiths' office tweeted.

The SE would like to announce the restart of the intra-Yemeni political process in Sweden on 6 December 2018 [#Yemen](#)

– OSE_Yemen (@OSE_Yemen) [December 5, 2018](#)

A 12-member government delegation, led by Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled Al-Yamani, arrived in Stockholm Wednesday evening, one day after a Houthi delegation flew in from Sanaa – accompanied by the UN envoy.

The talks mark the first meeting between Yemen's legitimate government and Houthi militants, backed by Iran, since 2016, when 106 days of negotiations yielded no breakthrough in a war that has pushed 14 million people to the brink of famine.

The Sweden meeting follows two major confidence-boosting gestures between the warring parties – a prisoner swap deal and the evacuation of 50 wounded insurgents from the Houthi-held capital for treatment in neutral Oman.

The government delegation was carrying the “hopes of the Yemeni people to achieve sustainable peace,” said Abdullah Al-Alimi, the head of exiled President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi's office.

The delegation had delayed its departure until the Houthis had arrived in Stockholm after they failed to show up for the last UN bid to convene peace talks in September, sources close to the government told AFP.

The Houthis flew in to Stockholm on a Kuwaiti plane from Sanaa on Tuesday, accompanied by UN envoy Martin Griffiths, who had promised to travel with

them to allay their concerns.

FASTFACTS

The first Yemen talks since 2016 are widely seen as the best chance yet for peace, as the international community throws its weight behind efforts to resolve the conflict.

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The Houthis flew in to Stockholm on a Kuwaiti plane from Sanaa on Tuesday, accompanied by UN envoy Martin Griffiths, who had promised to travel with them to allay their concerns.

On Wednesday, a half-dozen members of the Houthi delegation could be seen on the grounds of the venue for the talks, the Johannesbergs Castle – a large estate with a golf course in the countryside 20 km northeast of Stockholm's Arlanda Airport.

Bundled up against the wintry cold, Houthi delegates could be seen chatting and walking on the grounds, which were cordoned off by police.

The arrival of the Houthis followed two major confidence-boosting gestures – a prisoner swap deal and the evacuation of 50 wounded insurgents from the Houthi-held capital for treatment in neutral Oman.

The US State Department hailed the peace talks in Sweden as a “necessary and vital first step” and called on all parties to “cease any ongoing hostilities.”

The United Arab Emirates, another key backer of the Yemeni government, said the planned talks offered a “critical opportunity” to bring peace to the country.

No date has been announced for the start of the negotiations, but Yemeni government sources said they could begin on Thursday.

The head of the 12-member Houthi delegation, Mohammed Abdelsalam, said it would “spare no effort to make a success of the talks to restore peace and end the aggression.”

At the same time, he called on Houthi insurgents to remain “vigilant against any attempt at a military escalation on the ground.”

The announcement of a deal on Tuesday to swap hundreds of detainees was hailed by the International Committee of the Red Cross as “one step in the right direction toward the building of mutual trust.”

The ICRC will oversee the exchange after the first round of talks in Sweden.

The agreement, struck by the UN envoy in weeks of shuttle diplomacy, came after the wounded Houthis were flown out for treatment on Monday, meeting a key Houthi precondition for joining the talks.

Yemeni government official Hadi Haig said between 1,500 and 2,000 pro-government personnel and between 1,000 and 1,500 Houthis would be released.

On the government side, they include former Defense Minister Mahmoud Al-Subaihi, who has been held by the Houthis since they overran the capital in late 2014, and President Hadi’s brother Nasser, a general and former senior intelligence official.

The Norwegian Refugee Council on Wednesday called for the two sides to put a halt to the fighting.

“Yemen needs an immediate cease-fire and concrete steps to restore public services,” it said in a statement.

“Parties to the conflict must agree ways to reopen all ports and stabilize the nation’s collapsing economy, while facilitating full and unfettered access for people in need of humanitarian aid.”

Nearly 10,000 people have been killed in the conflict, according to the World Health Organization, triggering what the UN calls the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Rights groups estimate the toll could be up to five times as high.



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UN opens additional offices in Yemen's Taiz in face of humanitarian crisis
Yemen govt delegation departs for Sweden peace talks

[Egypt court hands Muslim Brotherhood leaders life sentences](#)

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Wed, 2018-12-05 16:57

CAIRO: An Egyptian court on Wednesday sentenced Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie and his deputy Khairat Al-Shater to life in prison, judicial sources said, in a retrial over violence during the overthrow of president Muhammad Mursi in 2013.

The sentence is one among several trials and retrials against Badie, Shater and other leaders of the party that ruled Egypt before the military ousted Mursi following mass protests against his rule.

Badie and Shater were sentenced to life in 2015 over violence between Brotherhood supporters and opponents near the group's headquarters.

Four others were also handed life sentences on Wednesday. The court acquitted Saad Al-Katatny, parliament speaker under Mursi, along with a former minister, two prominent Brotherhood figures and two others.

The defendants can appeal the ruling for the last time before the Court of Cassation, Egypt's highest civilian court.

The public prosecution may also appeal the acquittals or the life sentences that two defendants received instead of death sentences.

The defendants faced charges of inciting violence against the demonstrators in front of the Brotherhood headquarters, aggravated battery and the possession of firearms.

Authorities had referred 18 defendants to trial in the case. Five remain at large and one died before receiving a sentence.

The latest retrial began when the Court of Cassation accepted 13 defendants' appeals in January 2016.

Separately on Wednesday, two security sources and a judicial source said authorities arrested a justice minister under Mursi and are investigating him for belonging to an illegal group.

The security sources said National Security Agency officers arrested Ahmed

Suleiman at his home in Minya governorate on Tuesday and later transferred him to Cairo.

Suleiman had criticized the arrest and trial of Brotherhood leaders after Mursi was ousted.

After Mursi's ouster, Egypt cracked down on its oldest and most organized militant movement, killing hundreds of its supporters during the violent dispersal of a sit-in, throwing thousands of its supporters in jail and labelling the group a terrorist organization.

The Brotherhood says it is a peaceful movement and denies links to attacks by militants.



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Egyptian authorities detain daughter of senior Muslim Brotherhood leader
Egyptian court orders retrial of Muslim Brotherhood leader

[**Sudan lawmakers back amendment to let**](#)

Bashir stand again

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Tue, 2018-12-04 18:45

CAIRO: Sudan's long-serving President Omar Bashir came closer on Tuesday to another term in office after a majority of lawmakers backed a constitutional amendment to extend term limits that would have required him to step down in 2020.

Unless the constitution is changed, Bashir, in power since 1989, is not permitted to stand again when his present term ends, having won two elections since a 2005 constitutional amendment took effect imposing a two-term limit. Parliament speaker Ibrahim Ahmed Omar said he had received a letter signed by a majority of lawmakers backing an amendment that would extend the limit.

"Today I received a memorandum from 33 parties representing 294 deputies to amend the constitution with regard to the number of times the president's candidacy is allowed," he told reporters. "I will abide by the constitutional and legal steps and the regulations necessary to discuss these amendments in parliament for it to take any decision on them."

Sudan's ruling National Congress Party announced earlier this year it was nominating Bashir for president in 2020.

"We agreed to amend the articles after we collected 294 deputies' signatures," said party head Abdurrahman Mohamed Ali.

"The parties saw that President Omar Al-Bashir is the protector of the people of Sudan in the coming period."

Bashir, a former army officer, came to power via a military coup. He won elections in 2010 and 2015 after the constitution was changed following a peace agreement with southern rebels, who later seceded forming South Sudan. Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes after being indicted in 2008 over killings and persecution in Sudan's Darfur province between 2003 and 2008.

The National Congress Party and its allies have an overwhelming majority in parliament. Prominent opposition parties and armed movements boycotted the presidential and legislative elections held in 2015.

The proposed constitutional changes would also give the president the power to sack elected governors. Last month, parliament passed a law that will see governors elected directly instead of being appointed by the president, as previously.

Under the Sudanese parliament's regulations, a proposal to amend the constitution should be submitted by the president or via a memorandum submitted by at least one-third of the members of the 581-seat parliament. Sudan has been facing an economic crisis since the south seceded in 2011, taking with it three-quarters of Sudan's oil output. Sudan's opposition says Bashir must go to improve the country's image abroad and attract crucial investment and aid.



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Sudan swears in new PM as Bashir bemoans economic woes
Sudan ruling party chooses Bashir as candidate for third term in 2020 poll

[Angry clashes force Iraqi PM to cancel Cabinet vote](#)

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Wed, 2018-12-05 00:02

BAGHDAD: Iraq's Parliament descended into chaos on Tuesday as MPs clashed angrily over a planned vote on the remainder of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's Cabinet.

MPs boycotting the vote banged tables and shouted "illegitimate" in vocal opposition to Abdul Mahdi's proposed candidates.

The boycott – mostly by a group led by populist cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr and his allies – left the country's Parliament and two key ministries paralyzed amid fears of rising instability in Baghdad and the country's southern

provinces, lawmakers told Arab News.

Angry clashes among MPs forced Abdul Mahdi to leave the parliament building together with his eight candidates and cancel voting on completion of his Cabinet.

Candidates of the ministries of interior and defense were at the core of the dispute that erupted several weeks ago between the two biggest Shiite-led parliamentary blocs – Reform, led by Al-Sadr, and the Iranian-backed alliance Al-Binna'a led by Hadi Al-Amiri, head of the Badr Organization.

Falih Al-Fayadh, a former national security adviser and chairman of the Popular Mobilization Units nominated by Al-Binna'a to occupy the Interior Ministry, was rejected by Al-Sadr and his allies for being "non-independent." Al-Fayadh is viewed by most political blocs as "the candidate of Iran," negotiators for both alliances told Arab News.

Faisal Fannar Al-Jarba, a former commander of Saddam Hussein's special squadron, was also rejected by Al-Amiri's Sunni allies.

The two candidates had been selected by Abdul Mahdi along with six others, some of whom have also been rejected by other voting blocs.

"We clearly told Abdul Mahdi to change his candidates for interior and defense, but he insisted on bringing them again to the Parliament," a key Reform negotiator told Arab News.

"Today (Tuesday), we just repeated our message and told him again and again there is no way to vote for Al-Fayadh or Al-Jarba. He has to change them if he wants to complete his Cabinet, otherwise we will keep rejecting them, or maybe go to the street to do what we have to do," he said.

Parliament voted on 14 ministers out of 22 of Abdul Mahdi's government early last month, but postponed the vote on the remaining eight ministries because of a lack of agreement over suitable candidates.

The interior, defense, education, higher education, culture, justice, migration and planning ministries have been vacant since then.

The parliamentary session on Tuesday was delayed several times as Abdul Mahdi tried to convince leaders of the Reform bloc and their allies to vote for at least some of the candidates.

"The chaos inside Parliament today prevented the vote on the completion of the Cabinet," Abdul Mahdi told reporters. "We are looking forward to (reaching) a parliamentary agreement to vote on the current list of candidates or any other list."

Abdul Mahdi denied the latest voting delay would create an administrative vacuum. "These (the vacant) ministries are running by proxy," he said.



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Raucous Iraqi MPs halt session to vote on governmentKDP nominates Nechirvan and Masrour Barzani for Iraqi Kurdistan's top posts