

De-escalation of fighting in Hodeida is key to 'long-overdue' restart of Yemen peace talks: UN envoy

“Events on the battlefield” are the main spoiler to the peace process in Yemen, but political negotiations are the top overall priority for resolving the conflict, according to the UN’s envoy for the country.

As Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths had sought to avoid a military confrontation in the port city of Hodeida in the past few weeks, which has been racked by fighting between Houthi rebels and government forces backed by a Saudi-led military coalition.

However, in an exclusive interview with UN News, he pointed out that his “principal and over-riding responsibility” was to bring about negotiations to end the war. “Hodeida is an extraordinary and important issue,” he said, “but it is not more important than the issue of an overall political solution.”

Confirming that avoiding an attack on Hodeida is one of his top priorities, Mr. Griffiths said that it was clear from discussions with all parties that the solution to the Hodeida crisis was “tied up intrinsically with a restart of political negotiations”.

He cited as an achievement towards the political solution, an offer to give the United Nations a lead role in managing the Hodeida port. Both the Government of Yemen and the Ansar Allah leadership of the Houthi rebels have accepted this provision, dependent on an overall ceasefire in the governorate, he said.

Regarding a timeline for the negotiations, Mr. Griffiths said he would like to get the parties together within the next few weeks. The restart of negotiations were “long overdue” and the Yemeni people expect it to happen as soon as possible, he said, adding that he hoped the Security Council would meet in the coming week.

He also highlighted the importance of establishing a government of national unity as a priority for the ordinary people of Yemen, “all of whom cry out for peace”.

Reiterating that all parties were called on to de-escalate the violence as part of their negotiations, he recalled his earlier statement to the Security Council that “it is the war that will stop us bringing the parties together”.

Listen to our exclusive interview below.

South Sudan 'revitalized' peace deal must be inclusive, Security Council hears

Although recent engagement between the main political rivals in South Sudan is a welcome development, ending the country's long-standing conflict will only be achieved by addressing its root causes and ensuring women, youth and other sectors contribute to peace efforts.

That was the key message a senior United Nations official delivered to the Security Council in New York on Thursday.

Bintou Keita, Assistant Secretary-General in the UN's [Department of Peacekeeping Operations](#), updated ambassadors on the ongoing process to end nearly five years of fighting in the world's youngest nation, including mediation efforts by the African regional body IGAD.

The organization facilitated meetings this month between South Sudan President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar, his former deputy, leading to the signing on Wednesday of a declaration announcing a "permanent ceasefire" across the country.

Ms. Keita said these "positive developments" must be supported.

"However, peace in South Sudan will not be achieved or sustained merely on the basis of a bilateral deal between the two leaders," she told the Council.

"While the outcome of regional and international efforts to deliver a political settlement is yet unclear, I must reiterate that peace will only be sustained if the revitalized agreement is inclusive, fair, addresses the root causes of the conflict and engages all stake holders, including women and youth."

Akuei Bona Malwal, South Sudan's Ambassador to the UN, urged the international community to support IGAD's efforts.

"We would like to appeal to this Council and to other international actors and entities concerned with the situation in South Sudan to give the IGAD peace process that is currently and earnestly underway in Khartoum, full support. This Council must be seen as fully supporting the peace process for South Sudan, not just eager to dole out blame and punishment whenever there is a setback in the process of peace-making," he said.

South Sudan gained independence in July 2011 but descended into violence in December 2013, following a political impasse between the two leaders. A peace

deal signed two years later fell apart.

Since the start of the conflict, thousands have been killed, nearly two million have been displaced, and untold human rights violations have been committed, including rape, abductions and pillaging.

The violence has further added to humanitarian challenges the new nation already was facing due to the legacy of civil war from when it was part of Sudan.

Ms. Keita reported on various “security incidents” this month so far, including deadly attacks on villages.

She said the continued fighting has a direct impact on the humanitarian situation and people’s access to food. Moreover, 30 aid workers have been killed since the start of the conflict – seven this year alone – while a UN peacekeeper from Bangladesh died this week after his convoy came under attack.

With hunger and malnutrition reaching record levels as the peak hunger season approaches, Ms. Keita warned that more than seven million people could be affected.

“More than a million children under age five are forecast to be malnourished in 2018. This is a heavy and unfair price being paid by the most vulnerable of society due to no fault of their own,” she said.

[Iran: UN rights chief ‘deeply disturbed’ by continuing executions of juvenile offenders](#)

Following the execution of a 15-year-old in Iran on Wednesday – the fourth juvenile to be put to death in the country this year – the United Nations rights chief condemned the practice, citing the strict prohibition of such executions under international law.

“I am deeply disturbed that Iran continues to implement the death penalty against juvenile offenders, with some 85 others reportedly on [death row](#),” UN [High Commissioner](#) for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said on Thursday.

Fifteen-year-old Abolfazi Chezani Sharahi was executed after being found guilty of fatally stabbing a man. A total of five juvenile offenders were executed in the country during 2017.

“We understand that the execution of at least one more juvenile offender,

Mohammad Kalhori, is imminent and urge the authorities not to carry it out, but instead to commute the sentences of all juvenile offenders on death row," urged Zeid.

Executing juvenile offenders is in violation of Iran's obligations as a State party to the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

The youth was moved into solitary confinement four times before his eventual execution, further opening up the possibility that he suffered torture, or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The High Commissioner also expressed concern over the lack of transparency prior to implementing the death penalty.

When authorities fail to provide relatives with adequate information about the timing of executions, it not only imposes acute mental distress on the convicted person, but also on their family.

Zeid also reiterated the UN Human Rights Office's willingness to assist Iran in complying with its international human rights obligations regarding juvenile justice.

Hostilities in Syria's southwest, mean cuts in vital aid across Jordanian border: Senior UN official

Escalating conflict in Syria's southwest has cut vital cross-border aid deliveries from neighbouring Jordan, a senior United Nations official said on Thursday, in an appeal to warring parties to halt the fighting immediately.

[Jan Egeland](#), Senior Adviser to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, was [speaking to journalists](#) in Geneva, where he detailed the "heart-wrenching" effect of the renewed violence in the governorates of Dera'a and neighbouring Quneitra.

"The reports from our colleagues are that, even the extremely effective lifeline across the border from Jordan has been discontinued due to the fighting in recent days," he said. "Humanitarian actors have pre-positioned supplies inside Dera'a and inside Quneitra, however, movement is very difficult and humanitarian operations are paralyzed in too many areas."

Even the extremely effective lifeline across the border from Jordan has been discontinued due to the fighting in recent days – *UN Senior Adviser, Jan Egeland*

Until recently, civilians in the area had been to some extent protected from fighting by a de-escalation agreement signed last year by Russia, Iran and Turkey.

This had provided a “rare area of sanctuary and protection”, Egeland said, from the more than seven-year war that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and destroyed the country’s infrastructure.

Already in response to an upsurge in hostilities amid a Government-backed assault on opposition-held areas in the southwest, an estimated 45,000 to 50,000 people have been displaced.

After emerging from a scheduled meeting of a humanitarian taskforce at the UN, Egeland stressed the dangers of all-out fighting in a region where there are an estimated 750,000 civilians.

Many had already been displaced by previous hostilities, he added, before making a direct plea to Jordan to continue assisting war-weary Syrians.

“Our appeal goes to Jordan, one of the most generous recipient of refugees on earth, that they keep borders open for people fleeing south,” he said. “There is no other place to go”.

Egeland also took the opportunity to emphasize the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities. “It would take too long to negotiate a ceasefire,” he explained, before calling on countries with “influence” on the situation to halt hostilities, as happened with a lifesaving ceasefire in 2017.

“We urge...again, the Russians, the Americans, the Jordanians were able to do it last July, they can do it again today,” Mr. Egeland added, insisting that there was “nothing inevitable about this escalation of fighting...There are many more babies than there are so-called terrorist fighters in the zone and the children have the right of protection against attacks”.

Highlighting the dangers faced by humanitarian workers in Syria, Egeland said that there had been more than 700 attacks on health facilities since the start of the war – “more than in any other war of our time”.

To prevent future attacks, he urged belligerents to respect international humanitarian law, while also explaining that the UN-coordinated “deconfliction” procedure had helped to protect well over 660 hospitals, schools, IDP camps and other humanitarian zones, including more than 50 in Dera’a.

“We cannot have more bombing of hospitals,” he said, noting that five had already been targeted in Dera’a that were not part of the deconfliction procedure and whose coordinates had not been passed to the belligerents.

Turning to Idlib in the northwest, Egeland described the situation as one of “extreme concern”.

Of the 900,000 people who have been displaced inside Syria since the start of the year, 500,000 have fled to Idlib, he added.

Delivering aid to the massive influx of people has been complicated by ongoing violence linked to armed groups who are vying for control, the UN Senior Adviser explained.

“All of these armed groups that have come there and who are in opposition to each other – and who also have been difficult to humanitarian actors – are exacerbating the problems of this being the largest collection of internal displacement camp on earth.”

[UN chief welcomes ‘first concrete step’ in normalizing Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship](#)

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has welcomed the high-level visit of a delegation from Eritrea to neighbouring Ethiopia which began on Tuesday, as “a first concrete step” in the process of normalizing relations between the two countries.

“The Secretary-General notes that [diplomatic overtures](#) to ease tensions and resolve the longstanding dispute between the two countries will have a far reaching positive impact on the whole region,” said his spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric in a statement on Thursday.

“The Secretary-General once again reiterates the readiness of the United Nations to play a role in support of the two countries in the implementation of the boundary decision or in any other area they would deem useful for the United Nations to assist,” Mr. Dujarric concluded. Last week, Ethiopia under its new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, announced its readiness to finally accept and implement a 2002 border agreement with Eritrea, that ended two years of bloody conflict in which thousands died. Since then, the countries have remained on a war-footing.

Mr. Guterres responded to the 21 June thaw in relations by welcoming the “positive step” and commended efforts by the leaders of both countries “to achieve sustainable peace and good neighbourly relations which, in turn, will have positive repercussions in the entire Horn of Africa region.”

This week’s diplomatic initiative to the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, was led by Eritrean Foreign Minister, Osman Saleh, and according to news reports, Prime Minister Ahmed announced that Ethiopian Airlines would restart flights to Eritrea, for the first time since 1998.