

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.