

New UN Syrian envoy pledges to work 'impartially and diligently' towards peace

Special Envoy [Geir O. Pedersen](#) pointed to the importance of trust- and confidence-building between the Government and opposition, saying that Syrians from all walks of life “need to be engaged and involved in the effort to build confidence and trust, and search for peace”.

“There will be no sustainable peace in Syria unless all Syrians are included in shaping the future of their country,” he said, echoing the words of the [Women’s Advisory Board](#) to the UN envoy, set up in 2016.

Syria remains volatile for those who remain inside and for those who wish to return – *UN Envoy for Syria*

Recalling the [Sochi](#) peace talks that established the Constitutional Committee, and the agreed-upon agenda of the UN-led Syrian political negotiations, known as the intra-Syrian talks, Mr. Pedersen asserted: “We are not starting from scratch”, but “it will require the readiness of all to deal seriously with the realities of the conflict and to work together to move things step-by-step in a positive direction”.

The UN envoy said that he sensed “a wide acceptance” that a credible, inclusive Constitutional Committee, once established, could be “a door opener to a deeper dialogue and genuine negotiations”.

He highlighted resolution [2254](#), which provides for a Syrian-led, UN-facilitated process to establish credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, saying that it contains all the “vital” elements for a political solution.

“It addresses issues of governance, a constitutional process and UN supervised elections”, which, he spelled out, was how “the Syrians, and no one else, should determine their future.”

Speaking to and cooperating with the Government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission, Syria’s umbrella opposition group, is the new UN Special Envoy’s “first and most important priority”. Mr. Pedersen took over at the end of December from the veteran Italian-Swedish diplomat, Staffan de Mistura, who had held the complex and demanding job of Syria envoy, since July 2014.

Mr. Pedersen told council members he had already had “frank, practical and constructive engagements” with a host of different parties involved in the process, including the Syrian Government – with visits also to Moscow, Cairo, Ankara, Tehran, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels – and meetings with senior officials of key countries in Geneva, at the Davos World Economic Forum, and

in Munich.

Status of Syrians at a glance

- 5.6 million are refugees.
- 6.6 million internally displaced.
- 80 per cent are living below the poverty line.
- Half the population is unemployed.
- 11.7 million need humanitarian assistance.

While “battlefield developments might be winding down”, Mr. Pedersen stressed “the conflict is far from over” and “the challenges of winning the peace are staggering in scale and complexity.”

“Syria remains volatile for those who remain inside and for those who wish to return”, he said.

With about half the country’s pre-war population displaced, much work also remains to be done over the fate of detainees, abductees and missing persons, according to the UN envoy, who cited the release of 42 either detained or abducted, as being of “immense humanitarian importance” and “an essential part of building confidence”.

He also flagged that “socio-economic challenges are acute”, particularly for women who have often become primary breadwinners, and face increased forms of targeted violence.

Noting that international forces operating within Syria on the side of either the Government or rebel fighters, could lead to further international escalation and tension, and he vowed to focus on “improving international dialogue and cooperation.”

“There is no military solution and the true victors will be those who can move beyond slogans and paint a hopeful picture...even if the road towards it will be long and hard”, he asserted.

He concluded on a note of optimism by drawing on his first-hand experience “that history can bend in directions that nobody anticipated”.

Young people worldwide can ‘determine the future of migration,’ says UN

senior official

The key role that young people play in determining the future of migration governance around the world is the focus of the session this year of the [International Dialogue on Migration](#) at the UN, convened by the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) on Thursday.

The meeting was focussed on promoting best practices and recommendations on all areas relevant to youth and migration policy, including making young people a part of the decision-making process, empowering young migrants, and countering hate speech against vulnerable people on the move.

In his opening speech to the meeting, António Vitorino, Director General of IOM, declared that, with 1.8 billion young people – those aged between 10 and 24 – in the world today, it is essential to ensure that they are given the opportunity to determine their own futures.

Pointing to the recent protests by schoolchildren against climate change that have taken place in many countries, Mr. Vitorino said that this shows that today's youth is already finding its voice: "The question is whether we are ready to listen, and act."

With many young people finding job opportunities limited in their home countries, he continued, they are taking extensive risks, to find a better life overseas. But, he said, while "risk-taking is a characteristic of the young, and one that drives our societies forward with each new generation, such risks should not be taken at the cost of lives or livelihoods."

António Vitorino also emphasised the importance of education to young migrants, many of whom are denied access to training opportunities in host countries, and experience discrimination in schools. He called on governments to ensure that they are treated "equally, with dignity, and full respect for their human rights."

Maria Fernanda Espinosa, President of the General Assembly, also took up the theme of risk-taking by young migrants. She mentioned the migrant death toll, estimated at more than 60,000 since the beginning of the century, and the thousands of human trafficking victims. Those young migrants who successfully make it to a desired destination country may face, she said, the "cruel practice" of separation from their parents by the authorities, xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance.

Ms. Espinosa and Mr. Vitorino were joined on the podium by Jayathma Wickramanayake, The UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, who raised the importance of the UN's [Youth 2030](#) strategy, which aims to scale up global, regional and national actions to meet young people's needs, and described the International Dialogue as "an important step" on the way to engaging "the most marginalized young people."

Ms. Wickramanayake said that she was "deeply worried" by the largely negative

narrative and political polarization surrounding migration, calling for more recognition to be given to the important role that young people play in “the achievement of sustainable development and their positive contributions to origin and host communities.”

The International Dialogue on Migration was created in 2001 by the IOM, to provide a forum for policy dialogue between policy dialogue between host and destination countries, civil society, migrants, experts and other relevant parties.

[Mine ban agreement ‘has saved countless lives’, but ‘accelerated efforts’ needed to end scourge for good: Guterres](#)

Although a landmark convention banning Anti-Personnel Mines has saved “countless lives” and limbs over the past 20 years, “accelerated efforts” are needed to ensure that they are removed from the face of the earth forever, the UN chief said on Thursday.

[Secretary-General António Guterres](#) issued a statement on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the [Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention](#) coming into force, on 1 March, 1999, saying it was a welcome milestone, but more countries needed to sign up and ratify “as soon as possible”.

The statement said that the Convention had “saved countless lives, stopped mutilation and injury and enabled the revitalization of livelihoods.”

His Spokesman added that the UN chief “commends the commitment of the States parties to rid the world of a weapon that kills and maims indiscriminately, while seriously impeding peace and development. He added that Mr. Guterres He congratulated the 31 States who have been able to declare their land mine-free, and “urges all States that have not done so to accede as soon as possible to the Convention.”

Mines must become ‘a relic of the past’

The Convention was concluded at an international conference in September 1997 in Oslo, Norway, in September 1997, and [bans the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines](#), and calls for their total destruction. It’s also referred to as the Ottawa Convention, as it was opened for signature in the Canadian city, at the end of 1997.

It remained open at UN Headquarters in New York, until its entry into force, but in December 1997 a total of 122 Governments signed the treaty, with Burkina Faso becoming the 40th country to ratify the agreement, triggering its entry into force in 1999.

“The Secretary-General calls for accelerated efforts to render anti-personnel mines a relic of the past. He also appeals to States to ensure access to sustainable assistance and services for the thousands of mine victims,” said the statement.

[Service and Sacrifice: For Ghana, UN peacekeeping is a ‘noble opportunity to serve humanity’](#)

Brigadier General (Dr) Emmanuel Wekem Kotia, the Commander of the Western Sector in the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo ([MONUSCO](#)), spoke with *UN News* about his decades-long service, which includes participation in the Organization’s ground-breaking transitional operation in Cambodia – a launch pad for key UN peacekeeping activities such as disarmament and reintegration, and electoral support component – and the post-electoral security landscape in the DRC.

UN News: How would you characterize the current situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Brig. Gen. Kotia: The situation remains calm. The President is continuing the transition by nominating his prime minister and other key ministers.

Security wise, there Western sector remains relatively calm, except for a few ethnic problems within the Yumbi area and the Kasai regions. However, on the Eastern front, there continue to be a number of activities by armed elements. MONUSCO, jointly with the armed forces of the DRC [known by the French acronym *FARDC*], are continuing to monitor the situation [there].

Also, one must not discount the issue of human rights abuses sporadically being perpetrated in various parts of the country. In addition, the continuing increase [in the number of cases] of the Ebola virus disease in the eastern part of the country, specifically Butembo (in North Kivu) and the other areas in the east, is cause for concern.

So far, more than 700 Ebola cases have been identified. However, MONUSCO, humanitarian and other UN agencies, and the local authorities, are continuing to work very hard to contain the situation.

The relationship between the [*FARDC*]and MONUSCO has been very cordial. Even

in the Eastern sector where we have the armed elements who are fighting against the Government. MONUSCO personnel are jointly working out plans and fighting alongside the FARDC against the rebel groups in those areas.

However, it must be noted that the Congolese Government may need to enact a host of measures to be able to facilitate the operational capability of the FARDC, as well as provide logistic facilities or resources for the civilian police to be able to undertake their duties within local communities.

It is also very important for the Government to take ownership of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process for all the rebel factions that are turning in their weapons or voluntarily disarming themselves, especially in the areas around the Kasais.



MONUSCO/Force

Brigadier General Emmanuel Wekem Kotia, the Commander of the Western Sector in the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

UN News: What are some of the highlights and some of the challenges you have encountered while serving with a UN mission?

Brig. Gen. Kotia:My participation in UN missions began when [they] were based on the traditional concepts. Now, from those traditional concepts, the UN moved to integrated operations – from dependence purely on a military force, towards a greater level of mixing the police, military and the civilians.

The UN then moved ahead to a more international dimension, by which, in addition to these components that I've mentioned, the issues of human rights and humanitarian support were introduced as part of its missions.

The UN has sustained itself very well in such multidimensional operations for some time. However, as a result of the report issued by the high-level panel that was set up by the former UN Secretary-General and the realities on the

ground, in contemporary UN peacekeeping, we have moved from a combination of multidimensional to high risk peacekeeping operations – a situation that is now very dynamic and fluid.

Using MONUSCO as an example, we have the core MONUSCO troops who are working or maintaining peace by protection through projection. However, we also have a Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) that has a mandate to undertake offensive operations to protect civilians due to the [activities] of various armed elements in the region that have attacked MONUSCO, as well as other civilians.

To protect civilians in the DRC and elsewhere, it is important to underline that higher risk peacekeeping missions must move towards more offensive operations. Indeed, the FIB in the Democratic Republic of the Congo could serve as a template for setting up similar capacities in Mali and the Central African Republic, or other high-risk areas that we are might have peacekeeping operations.

One key issue is that in most conflict areas, we operate in very difficult environments, and that is a very big challenge. Peacekeepers come from different countries and they need to get accustomed to these environments.

One must consider [UN peacekeeping] an opportunity to work in the service of global peace. It means that you are an ambassador from your country, working for peace – *Brig. Gen. Kotia of MONUSCO*

Another challenge has to do with the background of conflicts. Most conflicts, especially those in Africa, are not well-understood by peacekeepers before they are deployed. Since the concepts of operation are not specific, peacekeepers most often must adjust their activities to deal with on-the-ground challenges. Additionally, we sometimes have inadequate numbers of peacekeepers to fulfill a mandate that is very big and that has a very wide scope.

UN News: What are the factors that have helped troops succeed in missions you have participated in?

Brig. Gen. Kotia: There are various factors. First, one must understand that peacekeeping mandates are set [as a matter of] international law. So, adherence to that mandate and policy guidelines and directives are among the key things that have helped troops succeed. Another area that has helped peacekeepers to succeed, and my troops specifically, is that we've had a very intensive pre-operational training before deployment. This training prepares [the troops] through, among others, a simulation of the areas concerned. You get to have a feel for it before you are deployed and so the conditions [on the ground] don't look so different from what you might have seen in training.

Moreover, training – continuous training and in-mission training – is key. In addition, ensuring that troops have equipment to match the mandate of a specific mission is also key to success. Apart from that, sharing the

experience of Ghanaian troops, especially in other UN missions, has also helped, and has reiterated the success of our troops in peacekeeping missions.

UN News: What is an essential element in maintaining professionalism in peacekeeping?

Brig. Gen. Kotia:First, peacekeepers must understand the dynamics of conflicts. Without an analytical understanding of the conflict, one might not be able to come up with plans or strategies in which to be able to succeed in a peacekeeping mission. So that is very key.

Respect for the culture of local communities is also vital. Let's remember that we are helping to stabilize an area or to create a secure environment for the people. We are not there to dictate to them what we want. We are there to support them or to assist them. So, we must first, understand their culture so that we'll be able to operate within the country and assist them to achieve peace.

Now another aspect that has helped with professionalism is the deployment of more women. In MONUSCO for instance, the introduction of the female engagement team has been very successful. In my sector, especially, when female engagement teams are sent in to assist people in deprived communities, they are very well received. These teams interact with children and other women to help them understand the essence of why peacekeepers have been deployed.

UN News: Can you share with us anything specific that has stuck with you throughout your time in the field?

Brig. Gen. Kotia:If I were to select one special instance or peacekeeping mission to talk about it would be the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, which I consider one of my biggest stories. The Cambodia mission was the first transitional authority mission set up in the history of UN peacekeeping operations.

The mandate of that mission set the stage for several groundbreaking policies. First, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) was first introduced in Cambodia, and it took place in my battalion. So, for Ghana to be one of the first countries to experience the integration of a DDR programme was quite interesting.

In addition, the UN operation in Cambodia was the first time an electoral component was established as part of a UN mission. That was very useful, and I have been able to share that experience at other missions in which I served. It was also the first time a mission was set up to begin and end within a specific timeframe – in this case, the mission wrapped up within the time set out by the first mandate.



MONUSCO/Force

Brigadier General Emmanuel Wekem Kotia, the Commander of the Western Sector in the UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).

UN News: What advice or information would you give to men and women in Ghana who are considering serving in a UN Mission?

Brig. Gen. Kotia: I would tell them that it is noble opportunity to serve humanity. It gives you a chance to assist people in need to have a safe environment. One must consider [it] an opportunity to work in the service of global peace. It means that you are an ambassador from your country working for peace.

UN News: How would you describe Ghana's contribution to UN peacekeeping?

Brig. Gen. Kotia: Ghana's contribution to UN peacekeeping is quite interesting. Incidentally, it started in the Congo. Ghana was the first country to deploy in the then Congo now DRC, in 1960, with a brigade of troops. After President Patrice Lumumba was killed, the Ghana battalion was redeployed to the Kasais.

Since then, Ghana has become one of leading contributors of peacekeeping in the world. We've seen Ghana deployed in 1973 in the Sinai, and then later with a battalion deployed to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Ghana also found itself serving in, among others, Cambodia, Rwanda, Chad, Liberia, and Bosnia.

Ghana's participation has been very tremendous so far as global peace is concerned. Our country has served as a mentor to other countries in this field. We have gone on to establish the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, which serves as a global training center for various aspects of peacekeeping. Ghana is considered as a mentoring country.

Gaza probe finds 'reasonable grounds' Israeli forces committed international human rights violations

An [independent UN report](#) into last year's protests along Gaza's border fence involving Israeli security forces, that resulted in the shooting deaths of more than 180 Palestinians, concluded on Thursday that there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Israel violated international humanitarian law.

There was "no justification" for Israeli forces to use live rounds, according to a [press release](#) issued by the [UN Commission of Inquiry](#) into the 2018 Gaza protests.

"The Commission has found reasonable grounds to believe that Israeli security forces committed serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law," Chairperson Santiago Canton told journalists in Geneva.

He added: "These violations clearly warrant criminal investigation and prosecution and we call on Israel to conduct meaningful investigations into these serious violations and to provide timely justice for those killed and injured."

Created by the 47-Member UN Human Rights Council in May last year, the Commission of Inquiry was tasked with investigating all violence linked to anti-Israeli demonstrations on the Israel-Gaza border from 30 March to 31 December 2018.

In total, the Commission conducted 325 interviews with victims and witnesses and analyzed audio-visual material showing demonstrators being shot.

Its findings indicate that Israeli Security Forces injured 6,106 Palestinians with live ammunition at protest sites during the period of its mandate, while another 3,098 Palestinians were injured by bullet fragmentation, rubber-coated metal bullets or by tear gas canisters.

Four Israeli soldiers were injured at the demonstrations, the report also found, noting that one Israeli soldier was killed on a protest day "but outside the protest sites".

Children 'shot playing football'; wheelchair users, medics, journalists

Ahead of the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the protests on 30 March, which Gazans refer to as the "Great March of Return", the Commission

of Inquiry underscored the need for Israel and the Hamas-controlled Palestinian authorities to do more to protect civilians, who continue to demonstrate near the border fence every Friday.

“The Commission found reasonable grounds to believe that Israeli snipers shot at journalists, health workers, children and persons with disabilities, knowing they were clearly recognizable as such,” it said in a statement.

Commissioner Betty Murungi described how an 11-year-old boy was shot while playing football near the fence with Israel. He subsequently had one of his legs amputated.

“Although the killings have lessened, we still see protected groups of individuals including children...still being killed as recently as three weeks ago,” said Commissioner Sara Hossain.

She added that paramedics and journalists also continue to be injured at demonstration sites, while also dismissing the idea that the protesters were intent on violent acts.

“We found that in all of the demonstrations, there was violence in the form of the use of the throwing of stones and burning of tyres by a minority of demonstrators,” she said, adding that “the vast majority” were not involved in any form of violence.

“There were women and children present, there were people having poetry reading, playing music, waving flags, things that can’t in any way be considered to be violent,” she insisted: “I think the characterization of all the demonstrators as violent is something we wouldn’t agree with.”

De facto authorities ‘must encourage peaceful protests’

In addition to the appeal to Israel to cooperate with an investigation into the killings, Commission chairperson Santiago Canton called on the de facto authorities in Gaza to ensure that demonstrations were peaceful.

“The Commission finds that these protests were a call for help from a population in despair”, Santiago Canton said. “Not only Israel but also the de facto authorities led by Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have responsibilities towards them.

Mr Santiago also called noted the Commission’s call for Israel to lift the blockade of Gaza, and in particular allow those in need of urgent medical care to leave the territory, after it found that hospitals there were “literally overwhelmed by the sheer number of death and injuries” after demonstrations on 14 May.

The Commission of Inquiry’s full report will be presented to the Human Rights Council on 18 March 2019.