

UN envoy 'encouraged' by Astana talks on avoiding 'worst-case scenario' in Syria's Idlib

The United Nations Special Envoy for Syria on Wednesday detailed his most recent efforts to revive stalled peace talks which could end the brutal conflict that has been raging there for more than seven years.

"As instructed by the Secretary-General, I have been consulting with a broad spectrum of relevant stakeholders and proactively identified options for a meaningful re-launch" of the complex UN-led efforts in Geneva, to forge a lasting peace, said Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, briefing the Security Council via video-link.

Since January 2016, the Geneva-based envoy has conducted several rounds of negotiations between the warring Syrian parties – talks known as the Geneva process. The last meeting took place in Vienna, in late January.

The talks focus on how Syria will be governed; a timetable and process to draft a new constitution; and the holding of elections as the basis for a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process, to end the brutal conflict.

Mr. de Mistura said he had been on a "tour" of consultations over the past two weeks, meeting with the Syrian Government and opposition, as well as Security Council members. He had also held talks with members of the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, the European Union's High Representative – as well as key European governments -Turkey, Russia and Iran.

"I returned to Geneva with a mixed picture," he said, explaining that significant differences still remain between key actors, but all agree on the need to de-escalate the fighting and form a UN-sponsored constitutional committee.

They also agree on the need to create a "safe, calm and neutral environment", he said, that enables the achievements of objectives in the political process and the need to respect Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence.

"But these commonalities risk getting lost, especially in the absence of serious international dialogue," Mr. de Mistura warned, adding that careful but proactive high-level diplomacy is required more than ever.

His office is assessing a number of creative options to revive and advance the Geneva process, he said.

Regarding the northern rebel-held area of Idlib, Mr. de Mistura said that if the Syrian government's previously-used tactic of bombing a rebel territory

followed by negotiations and then mass evacuations is repeated in Idlib, it could affect “six times” more people than the battle to retake the suburbs of Ghouta, near the capital Damascus.

“If we see a Ghouta scenario in Idlib, this could be six times worse, affecting 2.3 million people,” Mr. de Mistura said.

Europe should make voice ‘more heard’ in today’s ‘dangerous world,’ says UN chief

In an increasingly dangerous world, the European Union (EU) need to make its voice “more and more heard” as a “central pillar” of multilateralism, said the United Nations Secretary-General on Wednesday.

Speaking in the heart of the EU, in Brussels, António Guterres told reporters that climate change, a multiplication of conflicts and the global non-proliferation regime, were challenging all multilateral institutions, and the system of international law.

[“We live in a dangerous world.”](#) For the first time in many decades, the non-proliferation regime both in relation to nuclear weapons and in relation to chemical weapons are put into question,” Mr. Guterres said at a joint press conference with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in Brussels, Belgium.

He flagged that the Cold War was back, but without the mechanisms of dialogue, contact and control that existed in relations between the West and the Soviet Union, to ensure “that things not spiral out of control”.

“We have a multiplication of conflicts everywhere, more and more interlinked with each other and linked to a global threat of terrorism that we feel can strike anywhere in the world,” he continued.

The UN chief cited climate change as another challenge, saying said that while globalization has brought enormous benefits it has also “dramatically” increased inequalities and impacted the security of the world.

“In this dangerous world, it is absolutely essential to preserve two things: Multilateral governance institutions and the rule of law in international relations,” he underscored.

Emphasizing Europe’s crucial role in this, the Secretary-General appealed to the EU “to be more and more united, more and more effective, more and more

present and for its voice to be more and more heard in international relations as a central pillar of multilateralism in today's world."

He concluded by saying that the UN supports EU efforts "to rescue" the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, from which the United States withdrew last week, as well as other efforts "to create conditions for a world in which peace, security, sustainable development and climate action are in the frontline of its activities and our common cooperation."

[UNICEF delivers medical supplies to Gaza in wake of deadly protests](#)

Two truckloads of urgently needed medical supplies have been delivered to Gaza, where scores of Palestinians were injured during demonstrations along the border fence with Israel earlier this week.

The drugs and medical equipment delivered by the [UN Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) and partners, include antibiotics, saline solution and syringes to treat an estimated 70,000 people.

Over the past six weeks, Palestinians have been demonstrating against the decade-long blockade on Gaza, but Monday's protests were the deadliest with nearly 60 killed and more than 1,300 injured.

UNICEF reported that medical facilities there are "[buckling under the strain](#)" of dealing with the additional casualties as the health system was already weakened due to shortages of fuel, medicine and equipment.

The agency added that the intensifying violence in Gaza has also worsened the plight of children "whose lives have already been unbearably difficult for many years".

UNICEF said more than 1,000 children have been injured in violence since the start of the protests, and "many of these injuries are severe and potentially life-altering, including amputations".

"Children should be protected, not targeted, used in violence or put in risky situations," said the agency, and called on all actors within the occupied territories "to put in place specific measures to keep children out of harm's way and avoid child casualties".

Half of all children depend on humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip, and one in four, need psychosocial care. Families receive four to five hours of electricity each day and 90 per cent have no direct access to clean water.

Syria: UN-backed watchdog says chemical weapon 'likely used' in February attack

Deadly chlorine gas was likely used in an attack that took place in a Syrian town in rebel-held Idlib last February, said the United Nations-backed chemical weapons watchdog on Wednesday.

The report, released Tuesday by the fact-finding mission of the [Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons](#) (OPCW), [concluded](#) that "chlorine, released from cylinders through mechanical impact, was likely used as a chemical weapon on 4 February 2018 in the Al Talil neighbourhood of Saraqib".

The report said that their finding was based on the presence of two cylinders, which were determined to have containing the banned gas, together with samples that showed chlorine was unusually-present in the local environment.

The conclusions were also based on eye-witness testimony, and the number of patients showing symptoms indicating exposure to chlorine and other toxic chemicals.

The report noted that 11 men had arrived by ambulance, all within the same hour, at medical facilities seeking treatment. Patients displayed nausea, eye irritation, shortness of breath, coughing and wheezing.

Saraqib is located about 20 kilometres south-east of Idlib and was not under government control at the time of the attack, said the OPCW report.

"I strongly [condemn](#) the continued use of toxic chemicals as weapons by anyone, for any reason, and in any circumstances," said OPCW Director-General Ahmet Uzumcu on Wednesday. "Such acts contradict the unequivocal prohibition against chemical weapons enshrined in the Chemical Weapons Convention."

The fact-finding mission was set up in 2014 in response to persistent allegations of chemical weapon attacks in Syria with a mandate to establish only the facts. It does not identify who is responsible for alleged attacks.

A joint OPCW-UN investigation panel looking into attacks in Syria, set up by the Security Council to identify perpetrators, was disbanded last November, when Members were unable to agree its extension.

[Around 2.5 billion more people will be living in cities by 2050, projects new UN report](#)

By 2050, two out of every three people are likely to be living in cities or other urban centres, according to a new United Nations [report](#), highlighting the need for more sustainable urban planning and public services.

Owing to both demographic shifts and overall population growth, that means that around 2.5 billion people could be added to urban areas by the middle of the century, predicts the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs ([DESA](#)).

Many countries will face challenges in meeting the needs of their growing urban populations – *DESA*

Most of the increase is expected to be highly-concentrated in just a handful of countries.

“Together, India, China and Nigeria will account for 35 per cent of the projected growth of the world’s urban population between 2018 and 2050...It is projected that India will have added 416 million urban dwellers, China 255 million and Nigeria 189 million,” said DESA, announcing the findings on Wednesday.

Megacities



UN-Habitat/Julius Mwelu

The [report](#) also estimates that by 2030, the world could have 43 so-called megacities (up from 31 today, according to reports) – those with more than 10 million inhabitants – most of them in developing countries.

By 2028, the Indian capital, New Delhi, is projected to become the most populous city on the planet.

Currently, Tokyo is the world's largest, with an agglomeration of 37 million inhabitants, followed by New Delhi (29 million), and Shanghai (26 million). Mexico City and São Paulo, come next; each with around 22 million inhabitants.

These swelling populations will place extra demands on both resources and services in urban areas, notes the report.

"Many countries will face challenges in meeting the needs of their growing urban populations, including for housing, transportation, energy systems and other infrastructure; as well as for employment and basic services such as education and health care," said DESA, urging governments adopt better integrated policies to improve the lives of both urban and rural dwellers.

At the same time, linkages between urban and rural areas will need to be strengthened, building on their existing economic, social and environmental ties, the report concludes.