

Syria: Amid 'promising' diplomatic steps, UN envoy says hostilities continue on the ground

22 May 2017 – Despite the “promising” steps in Syria that followed diplomatic talks in the Kazakh capital, Astana – a nationwide ceasefire announced last December, and the de-escalation zones created inside Syria to deepen that effort – a United Nations envoy today warned of ongoing hostilities between the Government and armed opposition groups in several areas, such as Hama, Homs, and Damascus.

“Astana produced, in my modest opinion, a promising step,” said Staffan de Mistura during a briefing to the Security Council in New York via video-teleconference from Geneva. A meeting in Kazakh capital, led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, saw agreement on a ceasefire between warring parties in Syria in late December 2016.

The Astana talks began shortly after to bolster the ceasefire agreement brokered by the so-called “guarantor” countries. Five months later, a deal was struck to set up “de-escalation zones” in Syria to prevent incidents and military confrontation between the warring parties. These zones are expected to also give greater humanitarian access to the 6.3 million people still living the country today.

And while the Astana process – which led to a “significant drop in violence,” including in aerial bombing – had been “good news,” Mr. de Mistura told the Council that the “not so good news” is that: “We have received reports of ongoing hostilities between the Government and armed opposition groups in areas such as Hama, Homs and Damascus. Some of these areas seem to be outside of the current de-escalation zones.”

Meanwhile, the Special Envoy said the Government of Syria has made some significant advances against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh), but he also cautioned about the “continued activities of Security Council-listed terrorist groups.”

He also gave an update on the sixth round of the [intra-Syrian talks](#), which wrapped up late last week in Geneva and have lately been held parallel to the Astana talks, whose aim to seek a political solution to the conflict.

“There is still a great deal of work to be done. We are aware that important gaps remain between the parties on major issues,” Mr. de Mistura said, explaining that his team has now prepared the ground for a “real negotiation,” which he hopes will be possible before too long. For the first time, he said, he has received the consent of all parties to engage at an expert level. He said he was also pleased that all parties were receptive the UN convening a seventh round of talks, which is intended to take place sometime in June.

Persistent persecution of Bahá'í in Yemen 'unacceptable,' and must stop, says UN expert

22 May 2017 – In Yemen, Bahá'ís are under pressure to recant their faith, according to a United Nations rights expert, noting that in April, the Public Prosecutor reportedly summoned by phone at least 30 members of the community to appear in court, and de facto authorities in Sana'a ordered the arrest of at least 25 more.

“The recent escalation in the [persistent pattern of persecution](#) of the Bahá'í community in Sana'a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Bahá'ís living in Iran,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed. “Many Yemeni Bahá'í families in Sana'a have left their homes and live in constant fear.”

Mr. Shaheed noted that the persistent harassment of Bahá'ís amounted to religious persecution in Yemen, saying “It is unacceptable for anyone, including persons belonging to religious minorities, to be targeted or discriminated based on religion or belief.”

In addition, two Yemeni Bahá'ís, Walid Ayyash and Mahmood Humaid, were reportedly arrested by political security officers at a check point near the city border of Hudiedah. Their whereabouts are unknown since their arrests.

“The new wave of court summons and arrest orders appears to be an act of intimidation pressuring the Yemeni Bahá'ís to recant their faith,” the Special Rapporteur said. “The Yemeni authorities, including the de facto authorities in Sana'a, have failed to respond to the call made by my predecessor and other UN independent experts last year,” he added, referring to a [call](#) made in October 2016.

“The Houthi de facto authorities in Sana'a must stop summoning or arresting the Bahá'ís and immediately release all Bahá'ís arbitrarily detained,” he stressed. “They must also start an inquiry into the disappearances of Mr. Ayyash and Mr. Humaid, and provide details of the investigation.”

The expert furthermore recalled the case of Hamid Kamali Bin Haydara, arrested in 2013, and remains incarcerated in the National Security Prison for ‘compromising the independence of the Republic of Yemen,’ including spreading the Bahá'í faith in the country. His trial has been postponed on numerous occasions, and is now scheduled for 1 August. The expert also urged for the release of two other Bahá'ís, Kaiwan Mohamed Ali Qadri and Pazhohesh Sana'i who remain detained since their arrests.

The Special Rapporteur reminded the Yemen Government and the de facto

authorities in Sana'a that the right to freedom of conscience, thought, religion or belief is a non-derogable right under any circumstance, adding that persons had the right not to be arbitrarily detained for exercising religious freedom or for belonging to a religious minority.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

[Climate-vulnerable islands in spotlight ahead of UN disaster risk reduction forum in Mexico](#)

22 May 2017 – Hurricanes, cyclones and tsunamis are increasingly common threats to the world's most climate-vulnerable island nations, whose representatives are meeting today in Cancun, Mexico, ahead of a major United Nations conference on risk reduction.

Addressing dozens of delegates from small island developing States, Robert Glasser, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction, said island nations read "like a roll call for [prevention, resilience and recovery](#) from recent disasters and near misses."

He noted that disasters on small islands affect the whole population, undermining efforts to eradicate poverty and build resilient cities and communities.

"If a high percentage of the population is affected, injured or killed, this can have long lasting consequences for recovery and overall development and economic activity," Mr. Glasser said yesterday, as the island nations gathered for the first of three days of discussions.

The talks are being held ahead of the formal sessions of the [Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction](#), whose preparatory meetings start today and formal sessions will start on Wednesday.

Held every two years since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to discuss disaster reduction, the 2017 Global Platform – the fifth such event to date – is expected to bring together more than 5,000 Heads of State, policy makers, disaster risk managers, civil society and other participants.

This will be the first international summit on disaster since the [Sendai Framework](#), which was adopted in 2015 in the northern Japanese city after which it was named, and consists of seven targets and four priorities for

action that aim for the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries.

Last year, 445 million people were affected by disasters linked to natural hazards worldwide including floods, storms, earthquakes and drought, 8,000 people lost their lives and direct economic losses from major disaster events were estimated at \$138.8 billion.

The World Bank estimates that the real cost to the global economy from disasters is \$520 billion per year and that they push 24 million people into poverty annually.

In his opening comments, Mr. Glasser applauded the island nations for “rising to the challenges and taking a leadership role in integrating action on disaster risk and climate risk in an era when extreme weather events have risen dramatically and trigger 90 per cent of all natural hazard related disasters.”

Calling these countries “on the frontline of solutions,” he noted their lead in calling for coherent implementation of the [2030 Agenda](#) and the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), as well as the Sendai Framework and the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change.

[On Day for Biological Diversity, UN says tourists must protect nature that draws them](#)

22 May 2017 – Tourism must not undermine the nature that attracts tourists in the first place, said the head of the United Nations-backed treaty on biological diversity, marking International Day for Biological Diversity.

“Tourism grows, so does the risk of harming the environment [...] It will be important therefore such developments do not undermine the very natural beauty that draws tourists in the first place,” said Cristiana Pasca Palmer, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity ([CBD](#)), in her message for the [Day](#), which this year is celebrated under the theme [Biodiversity and Sustainable Tourism](#).

Many natural areas with rich biodiversity, such as beaches, coasts and islands, mountains, rivers and lakes, are popular tourism destinations. Roughly half of the leisure trips taken globally are to natural areas, she noted.

It is therefore important to understand that the way tourism is managed will

impact biodiversity and conversely, the way ecosystems are managed will impact the sustainability of tourism, as tourists will not come to polluted or degraded destinations.

The Convention was adopted on 22 May 1992 as the international legal instrument for “the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources” that has since been ratified by 196 nations.

In 2010, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 22 May as the International Day for Biological Diversity.

In his message for the Day, UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Secretary General Taleb Rifai said: “Together we can make tourism an ally in fighting loss of biodiversity and achieving the Global Goals for a better world.”

In that regard, UNWTO is encouraging more destinations to set up sustainable tourism observatories, he said.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) has also been working with all its partners to explore pathways for ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism while also ensuring that it contributes positively to biodiversity.

“Biodiversity is as necessary for nature and humankind as cultural diversity, to build stronger, more resilient societies, equipped with the tools they need to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow,” [said](#) UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova in her message for the Day.

[INTERVIEW: ‘Our peacekeepers are saving lives every day’ – new UN peacekeeping chief](#)

22 May 2017 – With United Nations peace operations being carried out in highly complex environments and facing multiple challenges, [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres recently stressed the need to adapt peacekeeping to “our changing world.”

“Peace operations are at a crossroads. Our task is to keep them relevant with clear and achievable mandates, and the right strategies and support,” the Secretary-General told a Security Council meeting last month on the subject of peacekeeping. He also called on the 193-member General Assembly for political support and on the troop- and police-contributing countries for professional and committed personnel.

It is in this context that Jean-Pierre Lacroix took up his post as the new [Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations](#) at the beginning of April. The French national, who has more than 25 years of political and diplomatic experience, currently oversees 16 [UN peacekeeping operations](#) deployed on four continents.

UN peacekeeping missions are called on not only to maintain peace and security, but also to facilitate the political process, protect civilians, assist in disarmament, support the holding of elections, protect and promote human rights, and assist in restoring the rule of law.

UN peacekeepers go to the most physically and politically difficult environments, some making the ultimate sacrifice – as evidenced by the more than 3,500 peacekeepers who have lost their lives in the service of peace since UN deployments began in 1948.

Mr. Lacroix witnessed this first-hand when he recently visited the UN's operations in the Central African Republic and Mali, which lost seven peacekeepers between them this month alone. In an interview with *UN News*, the peacekeeping chief discusses a number of issues, including the challenges facing peace operations, his plans to make them more efficient and tackling sexual exploitation and abuse. *The interview has been edited for content and clarity.*

Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix talks to UN News on his new role.

UN News: UN Secretary-General António Guterres said recently that UN peace operations were at a crossroads and facing multiple challenges. Could you tell us more about these challenges?

Jean-Pierre Lacroix: Yes, we are facing challenges in our operations. At the same time, we should not forget that our peacekeepers – civilian, police, men and women, military personnel – are saving lives every day. They are protecting civilians and they are helping peace processes be implemented.. It is [also] important to recognize the added value of peacekeeping and what we bring to the societies and nations that are destabilized. I think this has been recognized by the members of the Security Council when we had the debate on peacekeeping on the 6th of April.

Challenges, yes, we do have many of them. I think the most important challenges are when we have operations on the ground doing their best but the political processes are not there for us to support ... and to support our operation... We need everyone – the UN, the Secretary-General, who is very much committed to supporting these political processes – to be very determined to try to make them move forward. We need the support of the Security Council as well to basically make sure that we get the right kind of support and that these political processes get the right kind of support.

In some cases, we don't have the kind of support we would be expecting from host governments. Our operations are quite often operating and deployed in

very challenging security environments. Therefore, we need to make sure we can cope with these challenging security environments. It's a question of posture; it's a question of equipment; it's a question of organizing ourselves so that we can both protect our peacekeepers better, civilian as well as uniformed, and better protect the populations we are serving.

UN News: The Secretary-General mentioned nine areas of reform for UN peacekeeping. What are your plans in the coming months to make peacekeeping operations more efficient?

Jean-Pierre Lacroix: One of the things that the Secretary-General said, and beyond the importance of pursuing political solutions which is really key, is that we have to make sure that we always have on the ground the right kind of deployment, that we optimize our resources and that the mandates are at any given moment the most adequate for the situation which we are dealing with on the ground.

We have to make sure that our mandates are evolving consistent with the needs on the ground.

We have to make sure that our mandates are evolving consistent with the needs on the ground. They have to be prioritized. We have to make sure that whenever we can we terminate peacekeeping operations or we downsize them and this is what we have been doing, and what we will be doing in some cases. And we have to make sure we continue this ongoing process of modernizing the peacekeeping operations. It has to do with a lot of things on which we are working. It has to do with training. It has to do with making sure that we have more contributions from troop-contributing countries and also those countries who contribute civilian personnel and police, more contributions that are ready to deploy. It has to do with modernizing equipment, resorting to new technologies.

One very important issue is to increase the number of female personnel – civilian, police and military. It is a question of gender parity, although parity has a long way to go, especially when we talk about military and police. But it is especially a question of efficiency because as peacekeepers we have to engage with the population and we are in a much better place to do that when we can rely on female personnel. So this is something we will be pursuing with very strong determination.



Under-Secretary-General Jean-Pierre Lacroix visits a peacekeeper injured in an attack on a UN convoy on 8 May 2017 in south-east Central African Republic. Photo: MINUSCA

I should also say a few words on partnership. This is an area which the Secretary-General has been pushing with very strong determination. We had a summit recently in April with the AU leadership and there is a lot more that we can do with both the African Union, the sub-regional organizations, and I

will add the European Union as well, to basically make sure we go hand in hand when we try to find solutions to the many crises which we are dealing with.

And there are important areas where we can develop our cooperation, especially in the area of trying to find political solutions in a very concerted way, which is the right thing to do, especially when we try to deal with crises in Africa. But also, how can we support operations that are deployed by either the African Union or sub-regional organizations? We intend to very supportive of these operations.

UN News: What support do you expect from Member States to help UN peacekeeping operations deliver on the ground?

Jean-Pierre Lacroix: First of all, we need their political support... their continuous political support to peacekeeping operations – from them individually, from the Security Council, from the General Assembly. This is absolutely key if we want to succeed.

And obviously, we need their support in terms of resources. We need the finances from Member States and we need to have the right kind of resources for our operations, even though we are making a very strong and determined effort to optimize our resources, as well as to downsize and terminate peacekeeping operations whenever it is possible.

We also need the contributions of Member States. We depend on Member States' contributions of troops, equipment, and so on and so forth. And here, a lot has been done. We have had since 2015 more contributions forthcoming, more contributions that will be deployable in less time, so we need to continue this effort. We still have some shortfalls in critical capabilities in some of our operations. We are working very hard to convince Member States, and especially those who can come up with some sort of specific capabilities, to help us.

UN News: The UN has a new system-wide strategy to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse. What is UN peacekeeping doing for its part to prevent this kind of abuse?

Jean-Pierre Lacroix: We have to be extremely firm and well organized. The Secretary-General has made the fight against sexual abuse one of his top priorities and the policies and the decisions that have been made are very clear in the sense that we will really do our best to both prevent and also deal with allegations in a way that makes it clear that this determination is there. We have to be organized as well... with the help of the Special Coordinator [on improving the United Nations response to sexual exploitation and abuse], Jane Holl Lute, and with the participation of not only DPKO but other departments.



Under-Secretary-General Jean-Pierre Lacroix and Mahamat Saleh Annadif, the head of the UN mission in Mali, visit UN personnel in the Timbuktu Super Camp, which was targeted by rocket attacks. Photo: MINUSMA/Sylvain Liechti

We have organized ourselves in a way that we are more responsive and troop-contributing countries also are more responsive and much more aware of the importance of dealing with sexual abuse and exploitation. I can really see that the determination of troop-contributing countries is much stronger. So we have to make sure that we have the right kind of response on the ground. We also need to make sure we address the plight of victims and we have put in place mechanisms whereby in the field victims have within our operations someone who will be in charge of making sure that their concerns will be properly addressed.

UN News: The United Nations will celebrate the International Day of UN Peacekeepers on 29 May. What is your message to peacekeepers who sacrifice so much?

Jean-Pierre Lacroix: It's a message of immense gratitude. They are doing a work that is extremely difficult and yet indispensable for the population they are protecting and they are serving. And they do it at immense risk.

Many of our peacekeepers have paid the highest price for that. We have had in 2016, 99 of our peacekeepers who lost their lives as the result of their courageous engagement in serving the populations. We have had recently the murder of four peacekeepers in the Central African Republic [the number later rose to six], and 10 peacekeepers wounded. And that comes after a number of other incidents. I would also mention one recent [death] in Mali, in Timbuktu.

It's gratitude, and not only gratitude but we owe them all the support that we can give them. I think there is a sense of responsibility that we all have within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. I can feel that very vividly. The team is very much committed, is very much aware of the conditions in which our people, our colleagues, operate on the ground and very dedicated to do their best to serve them and this is also my approach to that.

We will continue to do everything we can to help the communities, the civilian populations, whom we are there to help and to serve.

UN News: And what is your message to the communities?

Jean-Pierre Lacroix: We will continue to do everything we can to help the communities, the civilian populations whom we are there to help and to serve. Sometimes, it is extremely difficult and sometimes we don't have enough resources to do everything we would like to do. But they can rest assured that our commitment, our determination is very strong, even when we are facing the kinds of challenges that make it difficult and sometimes it's very challenging to protect the populations. Protection of civilians, protection of the communities in the areas where we are deployed is really our central mission. We never forget that.