

Yemen consultations have started, insists top UN negotiator

A positive environment exists for building trust between the opposing parties involved in discussions for a political solution to the Yemen conflict, despite the absence of one of the delegations in Geneva and insecurity on the ground, UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths said on Saturday.

Acknowledging the “elephant in the room” – the fact that the Ansarullah-Houthi delegation was not present in the Swiss city for the consultations – the UN negotiator insisted it was not a “fundamental blockage” to his work.

“The important aspect of these last three days is that we’ve started consultations,” he said, before adding that the “environment for discussions is fairly positive. Despite what’s happening on the ground and despite the fact that we did not of course get the opportunity to receive the Ansarullah delegation.”

Both the people of Yemen and the “remarkably united” international community wanted him to succeed, Mr Griffiths insisted, adding that he intended to meet Houthi representatives in Muscat, Oman, and in Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, which they control.

“We will have similar consultations with Ansarullah,” he explained. “Because one of the advantages of consultations is, that you don’t actually need to be in the same room, you don’t actually need to be in the same city. It’s more convenient – it’s what we planned, I don’t want to underplay that – but we will go, and we will discuss with them the fruits of the discussions we’ve had here. So we will be going to Muscat and Sana’a to take up the issues that we will have discussed here. This is what I mean by, ‘We have begun.’”

He insisted on the Houthi delegation’s willingness to engage in the UN-organized political process.

“I think it’s important to note that Ansarullah also wanted to be here, and they’re disappointed not to be here,” he said. “It’s important to make that point very clear. We have had extensive discussions with their representatives in Sana’a and in Muscat this past week and I have no doubt about that, whatever you may think. And they’re very keen to take this process forward, and so is the international community, who are remarkably united.”

During three days of “very fruitful” discussions with the Government of Yemen Mr Griffiths underscored the progress made on so-called confidence-building measures: the release of prisoners, the reopening of Sana’a airport, economic issues “of extreme importance” and a humanitarian access in areas “where it is possible” and pauses in clashes to allow the vaccination of children to proceed.

Noting the importance of his parallel discussions with women's representatives in Yemen as well as those participating in the Geneva consultations, the Special Envoy insisted on the importance of remembering the grave humanitarian situation in the war-torn country.

"There are two roads to peace," he said. "There's the high road, which is a description of the 'track one' negotiations between the official parties to a conflict, who of course have the fundamental responsibility of resolving it, of achieving an agreement which will resolve the conflicts, not the war. And then there's a low road to peace, which is about local arrangements to stabilize areas, to allow humanitarian access, to build confidence between the parties, to get prisoners out, detainees out and so-forth. And frankly, for 90 per cent of the population, that's the road that counts."

Speaking to journalists, the UN negotiator added that he was also keen not to let "too many days and weeks" before fresh meetings resumed.

"If I didn't think, if the Secretary-General didn't think that there was a real desire for peace, firstly, and secondly that there is a real solution – a political solution to this war – then we wouldn't be wasting your time," he said.