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Syria: UN-supported talks in Geneva extended until mid-December

30 November – Previewing what he said will be “not just a normal round of talks,” Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, insisted Thursday there should be no preconditions heading into the current round of discussions aimed at resolving the over six-year-long conflict that has resulted in immense human suffering.

“We have [...] been talking about the rules of the game, and therefore reemphasizing: no preconditions, Staffan de Mistura told reporters in Geneva, after meeting with the Government and opposition delegations.

The current round of talks will be taking place against “quite a backdrop of intense diplomatic activity” in recent weeks to find a political solution to the Syria crisis, following important meetings in Viet Nam’s DaNang, Russia’s Sochi, and Saudi Arabia’s Riyadh.



Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria briefs the press during the intra-Syrian talks, Geneva. Photo by Violaine Martin

And after the territorial losses of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as ISIL/Da’esh) in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, “there has been now a moment of truth; we need to find a political solution.”

So, he said, in what is “not just a normal round of talks,” if preconditions are raised: “I immediately stop the conversation and say, ‘Sorry, have you heard what the Security Council has said, have you heard what in fact many senior political leaders have been saying? No preconditions, let’s start the discussions again now.’”

The UN mediator noted that fact that the warring parties are still not meeting in the same room is by no means a deal-breaker.

What is important, he added, is “substance,” and the search for “commonalities” between the two delegations.

He also clarified that during the intra-Syrian talks, the issue of the presidency did not come up.

“We have not discussed the issue of presidency. We have been discussing the 12 points/principles, and you will see they are of a broad nature but they have an impact on everything in the future constitution; and we have started addressing the issue about how to proceed on a new constitution. So that issue has not even come up,” said Mr. de Mistura, adding that he wants to believe that the “issue should come up with the Syrians through UN supervised elections according to Security Council [resolution 2254 (2015).”

He also announced that the talks have been extended until mid-December.

Also, earlier Thursday, Jan Egeland, the UN Special Advisor for Syria, appealed for greater and more urgent efforts to enable safe evacuations of some 500 people, including 167 children, besieged eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus.

“Men with power are sitting with lists of children that are in urgent need of being evacuated, if not they will, many of them, die; and we still do not have the green light,” said Mr. Egeland, expressing hope that the evacuations are possible with the Government’s approval despite insecurity adding that calm could then be negotiated with both sides.

“It is heart breaking; it is intolerable; it will be a stain on our conscience for a very, very long time, unless it can happen very soon. I was told today that nine patients on this list have died,” he added.

According to estimates more than 400,000 people are trapped in eastern Ghouta, cut off from much needed food and relief assistance.

Yesterday, briefing the Security Council, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator had also underscored the direness of the situation there and called for urgent humanitarian access to ensure that the most vulnerable can be provided much needed support.

Security Council hears calls for ‘all of UN’ approach to stop destruction, smuggling of cultural heritage



Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO briefs the Security Council meeting on Maintenance of international peace and security, destruction and trafficking of cultural heritage by terrorist groups and in situations of armed conflict. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

30 November – The United Nations Security Council on Wednesday focused its attention on global efforts to stop the traffic in and destruction of cultural property, with the head of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) laying out steps to protect cultural heritage and ensure that it can serve “as a source of belonging and peace for all people in times of conflict.”

In her briefing, newly-appointed UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, spotlighted the Secretary-General’s first report on the adoption by the Council of resolution 2347 (2017), which, among others, condemned destruction of cultural heritage and the looting of cultural property.

The landmark text also encouraged Member States to take preventive measures to safeguard cultural property in the context of armed conflict and “take appropriate steps to prevent and counter the illicit trade and trafficking in cultural property and other items of archaeological, historical, cultural, rare scientific, and religious importance originating from armed conflict areas, notably from terrorist groups.”

“The adoption of resolution 2347 (2017) represents a major breakthrough, and it testifies to a new awareness on the importance of culture to respond to conflicts, to prevent radicalization and fight violent extremism,” Ms. Azoulay told the

Council, noting that she has been encouraged by Member States' strong actions to implement it and other Council measures that together provide key aspects responding against terror and hatred.

"In a very short span of time, 29 Member States shared information on new actions taken to protect cultural heritage, strengthening tools and training of specialized personnel, reinforcing international cooperation and information sharing," she stated, mentioning some notable initiatives underway in several countries.

While calling these "positive signals of deep change," Ms. Azoulay added: "We need to do more."

The UN cultural agency chief pointed out that of the 82 UNESCO World Heritage sites in the Arab region, 17 are on the List of World Heritage in Danger due to armed conflict.

"Over 100 cultural heritage sites across Iraq have been damaged," she explained. "All six Syrian World Heritage sites have been severely affected, including Palmyra, and the fabled city of Aleppo, one of the oldest cities in the world, now reduced to rubble."

Ms. Azoulay underscored that the UN response must step up efforts in several key areas that encompassed raising awareness of the resolution to strengthen its implementation by all Member States; facilitating data collection and information sharing, on trafficking routes, on damage assessment; and training peacekeepers in the protection of cultural heritage and integrate this issue into peacekeeping mandates and missions.

"In all this, I pledge today once again UNESCO's determination to support Member States with the necessary tools and policy advice," she concluded.

For his part, Vladimir Voronkov, the Under-Secretary-General of the UN Counter-Terrorism Office, explained how terrorists, particularly in armed conflict situations, destroy not only lives and property but in targeting World Heritage Sites, they attack historical roots and cultural diversity.

"The goal is obvious – to undermine national identity and international law," he said. "Because heritage constitutes a source of identity and cohesion not only for particular communities but the world community as such."

He also linked the looting and illicit trafficking of cultural objects with the financing of terrorism, noting a number of resolutions and legal frameworks to address these crimes.

"Protecting our cultural heritage requires us to make every effort to implement this international legal and normative framework by strengthening international cooperation," he asserted, suggesting the 'All of UN' approach as being key for an effective action.

He advocated for a stronger focus on investigation, cross-border cooperation and exchange of information, and for including private and public-sector partners to promote supply chain integrity and stop the illicit sale of cultural property.

"We can and must do more," he stated.

Via video link from Vienna, Yury Fedotov, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) told the Council that countries must be helped detect stolen cultural property as part of the work to dismantle criminal networks.

"We must take the opportunity to further strengthen efforts to better safeguard vulnerable cultural property in various areas of conflict, as well as pursue longer-term measures to prevent terrorists and criminals profiting from trafficking," he said.

He said there was a need to help countries detect stolen cultural property and improve international cooperation in the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of cases related to trafficking in cultural property.



“Only in this way can we protect precious cultural heritage from being lost forever,” he said.

The meeting also heard from Jürgen Stock, Secretary-General of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), and Alessandro Bianchi, Project Leader of Cultural Heritage Protection in Italy’s Ministry of Culture.

Global blueprints on refugees, safe migration should include protections for children – UNICEF

30 November – The rights, protection and wellbeing of uprooted children should be central commitments of global migration policies, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said on Thursday, as it released a new report prior to a meeting next week on safe, regular and orderly migration.

The meeting, taking place from 4 to 6 December in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, is a major step towards drafting the landmark intergovernmental Global Compact for Migration, an agreement covering all dimensions of international migration.

“Global leaders and policymakers convening in Puerto Vallarta can work together to make migration safe for children,” said UNICEF Director of Programmes Ted Chaiban.



Maria [name changed], 16 (on right), from Honduras travels north with her younger siblings, expecting to cross the border near Tultitlan, Mexico, to the United States, to reunite with her family. Photo: UNICEF/Ojeda (file)

It is the moment when world leaders will begin to forge consensus on political and financial commitments in line with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The report, *Beyond Borders: How to make the global compacts on migration and refugees work for uprooted children*, highlights best practices for the care and protection of refugee and migrant children and includes examples of governments, civil society partners and host communities working to support and integrate uprooted children and their families.

“Our new report shows that it is possible, even in countries with stretched resources, to implement policies, services and investments that effectively support refugee and migrant children in their countries of origin, as they transit across borders and upon reaching their destinations,” said Mr. Chaiba.

Refugee and migrant children are especially vulnerable to xenophobia, abuse, sexual exploitation and lack of access to social services. The report underscores the importance of having policies in place to protect them over the course of their journey.

It also presents successful case studies from around the world, including the implementation of minimum protection standards for refugee children in Germany, cross border child protection systems in West Africa, and finding alternatives to the detention of migrant children in Zambia. Other countries featured in the report include Afghanistan, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, South Sudan, Vietnam, Uganda and the United States.

Each of the initiatives can be replicated in different contexts and inform child-focused actions and policy change at national, regional and global levels to be agreed in the framework of the Compact.

The report also presents UNICEF’s six-point agenda for action, as a basis for policies to protect refugee and migrant children, particularly those unaccompanied, and ensure their wellbeing from exploitation and violence.

It also calls for the end of detention for children seeking refugee status or migrating, by introducing a range of practical alternatives, and advocates for keeping families together as the best way to protect children and give children legal status.

The agenda stresses that all refugee and migrant children have access to education, health and other quality services, and presses for action on underlying causes of large scale movements of refugees and migrants.

Finally, it promotes measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries of transit and destination.

New funding provides much needed boost for Yemen aid operations, but needs outstrip means



Almost 20 months into Yemen's conflict, shortages of food, medicine and basic supplies are placing millions of people on the brink of starvation. Photo: WHO Yemen

30 November – A United Nations-managed humanitarian emergency fund has allocated \$70 million to strife-ridden Yemen, enabling critical life-saving relief operations across large parts of the country.

“Through this new allocation, [humanitarians] will respond to the immediate causes of food insecurity and malnutrition; improve access to food, nutrition, health, water and sanitation services; and continue to support the ongoing cholera response,” said Jamie McGoldrick, the Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen, in a news release issued by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

“It will also provide a minimum package of assistance including shelter, non-food items and protection services to the most vulnerable individuals among internally displaced persons, returnees and host communities,” he added.

Approved Wednesday, the latest allocation by the OCHA-managed Yemen Humanitarian Fund has prioritized 95 districts across 15 of the country’s 22 governorates, including Aden, Al Bayda Al Dhale’e, Hadramaut, Hajjah, Lahj, Sa’ada Shabwah and Taiz.

It will also assist national non-governmental organizations which will implement more than 40 per cent of the total grant through some 33 projects run by 26 national relief actors (amounting to about \$31.3 million).

Even before the eruption of violence in 2015, Yemen had been suffering chronic poverty and under development.

However, close to three years of relentless conflict has left more than three-fourths of Yemenis in need of some kind of humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs and over 17.8 million people food insecure – 8.4 million among them severely food insecure and at risk of starvation.

The latest, much-needed allocation – made possible through contributions from 18 donors – will help many, but more resources are urgently needed to ensure that the \$1 billion funding gap in the 2017 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan can be closed and all those who need assistance can be reached.

“Basic social services in Yemen have virtually collapsed, therefore the continued provision of humanitarian assistance remains a lifeline for millions of people who continue to struggle in a crisis that does not make many headlines,” Mr. McGoldrick added.

From thorny to tasty: UN agriculture agency looking at cactus as climate resilient food



Cactus fruit. Photo: Tarquille.deviantart.com

30 November – With the reality of climate change becoming more real by the day, including its impact on food sources, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is urging communities around the world not to take the prickly cactus for granted.

“Climate change and the increasing risks of droughts are strong reasons to upgrade the humble cactus to the status of an essential crop in many areas,” said Hans Dreyer, the Director of Plant Production and Protection Division at FAO, noting the plant’s potential.

According to the UN agency, cultivation of cactus pear is slowly catching on, in part, boosted by growing need for resilience in the face of drought, degraded soils and higher temperatures.

This was evident during the recent intense drought in southern Madagascar, where the plant – once viewed as a worthless invasive species – provided a crucial supply of food, forage and water for local people and their animals.

While most cacti are inedible, the *Opuntia* species – also referred to as prickly pear – has much to offer, especially if treated like a crop rather than a weed run wild.

“Today the agriculturally relevant *Opuntia ficus-indica* subspecies – whose spines have been bred out but return after stress events – is naturalized in 26 countries beyond its native range,” says FAO, adding: “Its hardy persistence makes it both a useful food of last resort and an integral part of sustainable agricultural and livestock systems.”

Historically, cactus’ culinary qualities have been a prominent feature in Mexico as well as the Italian island of Sicily, renowned for its gourmet tradition.

In Mexico alone, the yearly per capita consumption of *nopalitos* – the tasty young pads, known as *cladodes* – is 6.4 kilograms and the plant is grown on small farms (as primary or supplemental crop) and harvested in the wild on more than three million hectares.

Cactus as source of water and to lower greenhouse gas emissions

Aside from providing food, cactus also stores water in its pads, providing up to 180 tonnes of water per hectare – enough to sustain five adult cows.

This usefulness is all the more important during droughts, when livestock survival rate has been far higher on farms with cactus plantations.

And with pressure on water sources only projected to rise in the future, cactus could become one of the important crops for the 21st century.

Furthermore, there is evidence that yields in barley – a major cereal grain globally – rise when cactus is grown alongside it as a soil-improving alley crop, and there is research showing that use of cactus in cattle diets reduces the ruminants’ methanogenesis (production of methane in the guts of animals, especially cattle and other ruminants), thus contributing to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Antalya: South-South Development Expo closes with strengthened cooperation to achieve Global Goals



Jorge Chediek, Director of UNOSSC, during the closing ceremony of the Global South-South Development Expo (GSSD). Photo: UN News/Laura Quiñones

30 November – The Global South-South Development Expo 2017 wrapped up on Thursday in Antalya, Turkey, with delegations from dozens of countries, key international organizations, and United Nations agencies reaffirming their commitment to strengthen partnerships and cooperation agreements to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

“We are extremely happy with the results of the Expo, we organize this event every year to create a space for the countries of the south, partnering institutions and other States including from the global north, to join together and establish new relationships to get more and better South-South cooperation,” underscored Jorge Chediek, the Director of the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC).

The 2017 Expo, which opened Monday, was hosted by the Government of Turkey and coordinated by UNOSSC. It focused on solutions ‘for the South, by the South, throughout the week. It drew more than 800 participants from 120 countries, and more than 30 media representatives who engaged in over 37 plenary and side events.

The theme “South-South Cooperation in the Era of Economic, Social and Environmental Transformation: The Road to the 40th Anniversary of the Adoption of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA+40),” aimed to engage stakeholders to scale up concrete solutions from the Global South to achieve the landmark UN 2030 Agenda and its 17 Global Goals.

During the closing ceremony, Mr. Chediek conveyed warm greetings from UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who attached great importance to South-South cooperation as a key ingredient of the efforts to achieve the SDGs and to combat climate change.

In his message, the UN chief thanked Expo participants for their commitment to sharing the knowledge, best practices and successes of the South.

“Many of the achievements of the expo are not reflected in these very impressive numbers themselves, they are reflected in the partnerships that are being established, in institutional friendships and agreements that are being developed and that will certainly generate results,” stressed Mr. Chediek.

Six publications were launched during the Expo, and over 90 institutional and individual partners expressed interest in nine initiatives covering issues that range from youth empowerment to rural development.

Earlier today, the first Steering Committee meeting of the South-South Global Thinkers initiative took place at the Expo launching a brand new online platform that will connect think tank networks from across all regions to exchange, share knowledge and collaborate on joint research.

A High-Level Forum of National Directors-General for Development Cooperation was also held today, to discuss insights and proposals for the preparatory process of the Second UN High-Level Conference on South-South Cooperation to be hosted by the Government of Argentina in March 2019, marking 40 years of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action for Promoting and Implementing Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries.

Security Council hails 'remarkable achievements' one year after peace deal between Colombian Government and FARC-EP



Signing ceremony of the Colombian peace agreement in Cartagena, 26 September 2016. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

30 November – The Security Council on Thursday marked the one year anniversary of the signing and entry-into-force of the peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC-EP).

In a press statement, the Council circulated the document containing the Agreement for Ending the Conflict and building a lasting peace between the Government and FARC-EP, while congratulating the parties “for the remarkable achievements of the peace process.”

The historic peace accord ended the Western Hemisphere’s longest running conflict. The deal had been the culmination of four years of talks hosted in Havana, Cuba, between the two sides, and which had led to agreements on key issues such as political participation, land rights, illicit drugs and victims’ rights and transitional justice.

“The members of the Security Council applauded the leadership and commitment of the parties to implementing the agreement over the past 12 months, which has brought to an end over 50 years of conflict,” the Council said in a statement.

The Council members welcomed the successful completion of the FARC-EP’s laying down of arms to UN monitors in August, calling it “a major milestone in the transition between war and peace.”

“Colombia’s peace process has sparked high hopes and expectations around the world and continues to provide inspiration for those seeking to end conflicts elsewhere,” the statement continued.

It also reiterated the Council’s “full support to the parties as they seek to turn the end of the conflict into a stable and lasting peace by working to fully implement the peace agreement beyond the laying down of arms.”

Additionally, the Security Council members welcomed the report of the visit to Colombia in November by the Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffery Feltman, and noted his statement in Bogotá on 15 November 2017, particularly regarding the importance of advancing the reincorporation of former FARC-EP combatants into civilian life with a comprehensive strategy and concrete action plans and resources to enable success.

The statement also noted “the importance of addressing the security situation in the former conflict zones, following some attacks, including on community leaders, human rights defenders and former FARC combatants, by increasing State presence and governance to secure a lasting peace.”

In this regard, the Council members urged the parties, with the support of the relevant civilian state institutions and security forces, “to redouble efforts to accelerate progress in implementation over the coming weeks and months, in accordance with the provisions set out in the peace agreement, including with respect to enacting the necessary legislation.”

According to the statement, they further underlined the importance of “upholding the political participation of the FARC-EP now that they have laid down their arms, in accordance with the peace agreement” and “the international community remaining closely engaged to continue to support and encourage Colombia’s work to implement the peace agreement.”

The Council members recalled resolutions 2366 (2017) and 2377 (2017), which established and mandated the UN Verification Mission to verify implementation by the parties of the process of political, economic and social reincorporation of the FARC-EP and the implementation of personal and collective security guarantees.

They “appreciated the efforts of the Verification Mission to provide support and to encourage progress” and

looked forward 26 December when the Secretary-General would submit the first 90-day report on its activities.