

REMARKS: Secretary of State John Kerry Video Statement on Syria Negotiations

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SECRETARY KERRY: For almost five years, the world has watched in horror as Syria has disintegrated into a brutal conflict, killing hundreds of thousands and displacing millions both within and outside the country. Syria today is an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe, unmatched since World War II.

In recent months, a new and broad-based diplomatic initiative was launched, for the first time involving all of the key countries in the conflict. The goal is to reduce the violence, isolate terrorist groups such as Daesh, and create the basis for an inclusive, peaceful, and pluralistic Syria we all seek.

This weekend, we enter a pivotal phase in that diplomatic effort. Officials from the Syrian regime and an inclusive opposition represented by the High Negotiations Committee, begin UN-sponsored negotiations in Geneva. This morning, in light of what is at stake in these talks, I appeal to both sides to make the most of this moment – to seize the opportunity for serious negotiations – to negotiate in good faith, with the goal of making concrete, measurable progress in the days immediately ahead.

The world is hoping that both sides will move quickly to meet the needs of millions of desperate Syrians, to reduce the pressure on neighboring countries, to reduce the levels of migration, and to help restore peace and stability.

The main topics on the agenda for these negotiations include arrangements for a nationwide ceasefire and establishing a path to a political transition that will bring this conflict to an end in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué of 2012 and UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

Now, while battlefield dynamics can affect negotiating leverage, in the end there is no military solution to this conflict. Without negotiations, the bloodshed will drag on until the last city is reduced to rubble and virtually every home, every form of infrastructure, and every semblance of civilization is destroyed. And that will ensure an increased number of terrorists created by, and attracted to, this fight. This conflict could easily engulf the region if left to spiral completely out of control. That is what the negotiations in Geneva can prevent.

There is also an urgent and compelling imperative required by international law and simple human decency that we take steps now to improve the situation on the ground for the Syrian people.

The humanitarian crisis, already disastrous and unacceptable, is actually growing worse by the day. The numbers alone are staggering. An estimated 13.5 million Syrians are in urgent need now of humanitarian aid. Six million are children. Hundreds of thousands are still trapped in areas where food deliveries are non-existent or rare. Behind each of these numbers is a human being just like any of us – a man, woman, or child experiencing suffering on an almost unimaginable scale.

Shockingly, less than one percent – one person in a hundred, one area in a hundred – of the besieged population of Syria received food aid in all of 2015. And we are not just talking about remote, hard-to-reach areas.

The town of Madaya is just an hour's drive from Damascus. And yet, in recent months, its people have been reduced to eating grass and leaves. How has the regime and the militias that support it responded? By planting land mines and erecting barbed wire to keep relief workers out. This weekend, we heard reports that another 16 people in the town have died due to starvation amid the bitter winter's cold. Other residents have been described as walking skeletons.

And the tragedy in Madaya is far from the only case. Overall, since the beginning of last year, the Syrian regime has received 113 requests from the United Nations to deliver humanitarian aid. Astonishingly, just 13 of these requests have been approved and implemented. Meanwhile, people are dying; children are suffering not as a result of an accident of war, but as the consequence of an intentional tactic – surrender or starve. And that tactic is directly contrary to the law of war.

Let me be clear. The Syrian regime has a fundamental responsibility; all the parties to the conflict have a duty – to

facilitate humanitarian access to populations in desperate need, not in a week, not after further discussions, but right now – today.

Under Resolution 2254, the government and all parties have an obligation, as well, to cease bombings and other attacks against civilians – not eventually, again, but immediately. The international community must be united in pressing for compliance. Both governments supporting the opposition and especially governments that are supporting Bashar al-Assad, whose forces control the vast majority of the territory under siege, have this obligation also.

We must not forget what the Syrian people will always remember: Assad and his allies have, from the very beginning, been by far the primary source of killing, torture, and deprivation in this war; and the primary magnet drawing foreign fighters to Syria, giving cause to Daesh.

In recent weeks, colleagues from the International Syrian Support Group have been in constant contact in order to forge a more unified and collaborative approach to de-escalating this conflict, and also to ensure access to besieged areas for humanitarian workers and supplies. The world needs to push in one direction – toward stopping the oppression and suffering of the Syrian people and ending, not prolonging, this war.

Nothing would do more to cut the legs out from under Daesh than a negotiated political solution in Syria that would allow all sides, all parties, all countries, to focus on defeating the terrorist group Daesh once and for all. This imperative was underlined yet again just this morning, when terrorist bombers attacked a religious shrine, killing dozens, in Damascus.

The people of Syria deserve a real choice about the kind of future that they want. Not a choice between brutal repression on one side and terrorists on the other; that’s the choice the Assad regime would like to offer. What the people of Syria need is the kind of choice that emerges from a credible political process. This week in Geneva, that political process can get underway. The road ahead remains challenging. Success is not assured. But we have seen through years of savage fighting what the absence of serious negotiation yields.

So I urge all parties to seize this opportunity and go forward with the best interests of their country in mind. The United Nations Security Council has created a framework for bringing the war in Syria to an end. It embraces a ceasefire, humanitarian access throughout the country, a transition process, and elections within 18 months in which Syrians can determine the future of Syria.

So the opportunity now is real and present to achieve a future that ensures Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and non-sectarian character; to keep state institutions intact; and to protect the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination.

We call upon the parties in Geneva to take the first urgent steps and not to miss the chance this moment presents.