Beat: News

Long delayed Syrian peace conference set for Jan. 22 in Geneva

-, 26.11.2013, 04:11 Time

USPA News - An international peace conference for Syria will be held in Switzerland in late January, marking the first direct talks since the beginning of the civil war between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and rebels seeking to overthrow him, the United Nations (UN) announced on Monday. "The Secretary-General is pleased to announce that he will convene the Geneva conference on Syria in Geneva on Wednesday, January 22, thus bringing the Syrian Government and opposition to a negotiating table for the first time since the start of the Syrian conflict," said UN spokesman Martin Nesirky.

The date was agreed upon during a trilateral meeting between the UN, Russia, and the United States. Speaking at a press conference after the meeting, Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN`s Joint Special Representative for Syria, said the trilateral group was still discussing the complete list of participants and will meet again on December 20. "We are in touch both with the [Syrian] Government and with the opposition," Brahimi said. "We are asking them to name their delegations as early as possible, hopefully before the end of the year, because I think it`s important that we meet them and speak to them, and listen to them, because this conference is really for the Syrians to come to Geneva, to talk to one another, and hopefully start a credible, workable, effective peace process for their country." Brahimi described the long delayed face-to-face talks as a "huge opportunity for peace that should not be wasted." But with the peace conference still more than eight weeks away, the Algerian diplomat made a strong appeal to both the Syrian government and the opposition to already undertake confidence-building measures. "Diminish the violence, release prisoners and detainees of all sorts. You know, these two bishops that have been kidnapped, why are there still kept? As far as I know, they are not even asking for anything to release them," Brahimi said. "But being realistic, a lot of the things that need to happen will happen after the conference starts, not before the conference starts." British Foreign Secretary William Hague said on Monday that the Syrian National Coalition, which has been disowned by many rebel commanders, will lead the opposition delegation, but Brahimi would not confirm that. "What I confirm is that the National Coalition will play a very important role in forming the delegation but I have always said that the delegation has to be credible and representative," he said. Nesirky said the goal of the peace conference is the full implementation of the June 2012 Geneva Communique, including the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers that includes military and security entities. "The Secretary-General expects that the Syrian representatives will come to Geneva with a clear understanding that this is the objective," the spokesman explained. The crisis in Syria began as a pro-democracy protest movement in March 2011, similar to those across the Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian government violently cracked down on the protests, setting off an armed conflict between pro-Assad forces and anti-government forces. The United Nations estimates that more than 100,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed and millions more have fled to neighboring countries since the start of the uprising that escalated into a full-blown civil war. Opposition groups estimate the number of deaths has already exceeded 120,000, but those figures cannot be independently verified.

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1613/long-delayed-syrian-peace-conference-set-for-jan-22-in-geneva.html

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619