

UN VOWS TO AIRDROP SYRIA AID IF NEEDED, EYES RENEWED PEACE TALKS

GENEVA: United Nations Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura vowed yesterday to take the "last resort" option of air drops of humanitarian aid if land access to besieged areas in Syria is not improved by June 1.

Without improved aid access and some restoration of Syria's tattered cessation of hostilities, the credibility of the next round of peace talks would be in question, he said. The damage to the peace talks prompted the United States and Russia to convene the International Syria Support Group of major and regional powers on Tuesday, which toughened the truce terms and endorsed a stronger push for humanitarian aid.

"We want to bring aid to everyone. If the food cannot be brought by convoys, the alternative is air drops," de Mistura told journalists in Geneva. Air drops were "the most expensive, the most complicated, the most dangerous option", he added. "So the air drops are the last resort, but we are getting close to it." The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has made more than 30 air drops of food and other supplies to the eastern town of Deir al-Zor, besieged by Islamic State, due to a total lack of access, but that is the only location so far.

De Mistura said he would not abandon the peace talks, but was waiting for the right

date. "Obviously we are in a clear hurry to start reintroducing the next round of the intra-Syrian talks," he said. But if humanitarian access to besieged areas did not improve, "then the credibility of the next round of talks would be in question".

He said he would not rule out overriding any Syrian government objections to air drops. Observance of Syria's cessation of hostilities arrangement had gone down "from 80-85 (percent) to 50 (percent)," he said. De Mistura's humanitarian advisor Jan Egeland said a clear intention to organize air drops for Syria's remaining besieged areas would help convince President Bashar al-

Assad to allow humanitarian convoys to go in by road. "We do believe that the option of air drops will actually make it possible for us to go by land in the next weeks," he said.

Egeland said aid had reached 13 of 18 besieged areas after a convoy got into the Harasta suburb of Damascus on Wednesday. But another convoy was turned back from Daraya town last week because what he called "well-fed" soldiers barred it from delivering baby milk powder. Humanitarian supplies this month have not reached half the 900,000 people the UN wanted to supply in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, he said. The target for June is 1.1 million.—Reuters

FOR SYRIANS IN LEBANON, NO RESTING PLACE IN LIFE OR DEATH

BAR ELIAS, LEBANON: As if losing three infants in exile in Lebanon were not heartbreaking enough, Syrian refugee Ahmad al-Mustafa then had to relive the ordeal as he pleaded to find them a grave.

"I had three babies over three years. Each time, they died," the 29-year-old construction worker from Aleppo city says, standing outside his makeshift home in Lebanon's Bekaa region. "The problem was where to bury them," he adds, his tone matter-of-fact, as if numbed to the suffering.

Five years into the Syria conflict, Lebanon hosts more than one million refugees from the war-torn country, according to the United Nations. More than a third live in the Bekaa valley near the Syrian border.

As towns there strive to accommodate tens of thousands of Syrian arrivals, some local councils are struggling to provide them with burial services because town cemeteries are almost full. After fleeing Syria five years ago, Mustafa and his wife lost three babies aged three months, five days and just two hours old. When their first infant died, he approached someone he knew in a nearby town, who he says was kind and gave him a tiny corner of their family's burial plot.

When their second baby died, "we were forced to open up the old grave and we buried them together," Mustafa says. With the help of a religious leader, he buried his third child in yet another district. "We just ask the state and religious authorities to find us a plot of land not suitable for farming, so that if someone dies we can bury them," Mustafa pleads.

'Town can't take it'

Mustafa, his wife and two surviving children live in a refugee settlement outside the town of Bar Elias, whose population has doubled with refugee arrivals since 2011, officials say. Even before the war broke out in Syria—killing more than 270,000 people and displacing millions—the town's old cemetery was full, they say. "There's no more space in the old graveyard-for Syrians or Lebanese", says Saad Mayta, the town's outgoing mayor.

The graveyard stands on a small hill in town, its tombs packed so tight that visitors among its tall poppies and wild grass struggle to avoid stepping on a grave. A few burial chambers teeter dangerously off its highest point, where the hill drops suddenly from erosion. Mayta says around 70,000 Syrian arrivals have severely strained the town's waste, sewage, water, and electricity networks—as well as its burial services. Death rates among Syrian refugees are much higher than among the local population, authorities and international organisations say, because they are more vulnerable.

At least two thirds of Lebanon's Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty, according to the United Nations.

There are no official statistics, but Mayta says someone in the town's Syrian community dies every one or two weeks. "The solution is that Syrians go home to their country," says the soft-spoken official. "The town can't take it. We can hardly handle all the Lebanese."—AFP



SIRTE, LIBYA: A general view of buildings ravaged by fighting.—AP

ISLAMIC STATE SUICIDE BOMBINGS KILL 32 LIBYAN MILITIAMEN

BENHAZI, LIBYA: A spokesman of a Libyan militia says two suicide bombings by the Islamic State group have killed 32 of the militia's fighters.

Mohammed Shamia of the Misrata militia, which is loyal to Libya's new UN-brokered unity government, told The Associated Press that the attack happened on Wednesday night. He says two suicide bombers rammed their large vehicles packed with explosives into militia positions in the al-Washka and Bourayat al-Hassoun areas west of the coastal city of Sirte, an IS stronghold. Fifty militiamen were wounded in the attacks.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the bombings in a statement posted by its supporters on Twitter. The international community and Western powers have pledged to support Libya's UN-backed government and arm in order to fight the Islamic State group.—AP

US WIDENS SANCTIONS ON ISLAMIC STATE, AL-QAEDA BRANCHES

WASHINGTON: The US is expanding sanctions against groups and individuals associated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State group affiliates in the Middle East. The State Department is designating branches of the Islamic State in Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia as global terrorists. The State Department says they became branches in 2014 when the Islamic State group's leader accepted their oath of allegiance. The Treasury Department is also imposing sanctions on six individuals for supporting or fundraising for IS or al-Qaeda, including al-Qaeda's branch operating in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Those sanctions also target the Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda group in Syria fighting in close quarters with US-backed opposition forces.

The actions freeze any property the individuals or groups have within US jurisdiction and ban Americans from doing business with them.—AP