
UN Syria Envoy Says Damascus Gave Positive Signals on Local Truce Push

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Speaking in a news conference in Damascus after meeting President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian foreign minister, Staffan de Mistura said the government's initial response to the proposal "was of interest, and constructive interest".

Assad had also been quoted on Monday as saying the proposal was worth studying.

De Mistura hopes to institute truces and improve aid access in limited local areas, starting in Aleppo, once Syria's main commercial hub.

"I believe that the proposal of the U.N. regarding one freeze ... for Aleppo, is a concrete and realistic one," he said.

The state news agency said de Mistura and Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualeem agreed to continue consultations on returning stability to Aleppo and easing the passage of humanitarian aid.

Control of Aleppo is divided between an array of rebel and pro-government forces. Neither side has managed to take a decisive advantage in more than two years of fighting.

In a conciliatory gesture to Mistura, the authorities allowed a small convoy of U.N. trucks to bring aid to Homs's besieged rebel-held district of Waer after days of disrupting its entry, a U.N. source said.

Earlier this year, rebels withdrew from Homs's old quarter under a local U.N.-sponsored deal. Mistura visited the city on Monday, and was briefed about the hardships facing thousands of families in Waer, the only part of Homs still held by the opposition.

Mistura told the BBC that the threat to both the government and more moderate rebel forces from the radical Sunni militant group Islamic State might be decisive in helping to push them toward local truces.

Islamic State has seized swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and is now the target of U.S.-led air strikes.

De Mistura acknowledged that, even if the U.N. proposals went forward, it would only be a small step in a conflict that has killed some 200,000 people and displaced millions, and that a peace plan was still far off.

"But we do have an action plan. And the action plan starts from the ground: stop the fighting, reduce the violence," he said.
