

UN envoy confirms first Yemen peace talks in two years

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Negotiations to resolve civil war due to be held in Geneva in September

The UN's special envoy for [Yemen](#) has told the security council that he would convene the country's first talks in two years to secure peace between Saudi-backed forces and Houthi rebels.

Martin Griffiths said the "time was long past" for negotiations to resume, adding he would bring the parties together on 6 September in Geneva.

His announcement came hours after the Saudi-led coalition was accused of carrying out air strikes that left more than 25 dead and 50 injured. The bombs fell close to a hospital and fish market in the strategic Yemeni port of Hodeidah, which has been the focus of fierce fighting in recent weeks.

Griffiths's call for talks is seen as a potentially significant breakthrough in Yemen's civil war, which has claimed more than 10,000 lives and left millions of people on the brink of starvation.

A joint Saudi and United Arab Emirate coalition has been fighting to win back control of [Yemen](#) from Iran-backed Houthi rebels since March 2015.

The scale and timing of the Saudi air strike have been seen by some diplomats either as an attempt to sabotage the Griffiths plan - or a bloody signal that the Saudis were not willing to conciliate.

The International Red Cross said it was sending medical equipment to the Al Thawra hospital to treat 50 people in critical condition. There was no immediate comment from the Saudi coalition.

Yemen has widely been described as the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. Between January and May, aid agencies helped 7.5 million people, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said this week.

The war escalated after a Saudi Arabia-led coalition intervened in 2015 to restore the UN-recognised government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, months after he had been overthrown by Houthi rebels.

Increasingly, the war has taken on the characteristics of a wider regional conflict, with Iranians backing the Houthis in their efforts to push back the Saudi offensive.

The UN-sponsored talks, if they go ahead, might avert a Saudi and UAE-led offensive on the strategic port of Hodeidah, which is held by Houthis and used by aid agencies to distribute food, medicine and oil through most of the country.

The UAE announced an assault on Hodeidah on 12 June, capturing Hodeidah airport, but under international pressure has backed off from a full-scale military offensive to take the port and city.

The aid sector has said an attack would cut off aid to the rest of the country, and an outbreak of

guerrilla warfare would lead to civilian casualties.

More than 30,000 people have been displaced in the Hodeidah governorate. The UN humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Lise Grande, said this week that airstrikes hitting the city's water infrastructure risked causing a cholera outbreak.

The UK had urged the UAE not to start a full military offensive, but a fortnight ago it appeared to have accepted, in public at least, that little more could be done to change Saudi-UAE strategy.

The appointment of special envoy Griffiths, a former British diplomat, was seen as a fresh chance to end the stalemate, and he has been shuttling between both sides for about a month trying to widen a possible deal over Hodeidah's future into a broader agreement to hold talks on the future of the country as a whole.

His most recent talks were in the Houthi-controlled capital, Sana'a, and Riyadh, but he has also met UN ambassadors in New York.

The Houthis, backed by Iran, had offered for the port to be put under UN-administered control, but the UAE insisted the Houthis needed to withdraw not just from the port but also the adjoining city, a move that would have exposed Sana'a to a further assault.

Asked whether it was possible for talks to start without a ceasefire throughout Yemen, Karen Pierce, the UK's ambassador to the UN, said on Wednesday: "Are there precedents where talking and fighting can happen at the same time? Yes there are."

Previous Yemen talks were held in Switzerland in 2015 and Kuwait in 2016. Since then, diplomatic efforts to bring both sides together have proved fruitless, even though the international community has repeatedly asserted there was no military solution to the conflict.

The Saudi-led bombing campaign that has frequently hit civilian targets including hospitals, schools and weddings has hugely damaged Saudi Arabia's international reputation and led to pressure in Europe and the US for governments to end all arms sales to Riyadh.

There have been warnings that the offensive around Hodeidah was displacing thousands of children. According to Save the Children, 3,000 Yemeni children a day were fleeing from the port city.

The aid organisation described the escape routes from the city as often perilous, with families "having to brave minefields, airstrikes and being forced to cross areas of active fighting" to escape.

Tamer Kirolos, Save the Children's country director for Yemen, described Hodeida as a ghost town. "The streets are empty even in the day and there are checkpoints everywhere. The devastation that airstrikes and shelling have caused is clear to see."

He called for an immediate ceasefire and urged Yemen's warring parties to join UN peace efforts.

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