

Interview of Special Envoy Martin Griffiths with Al Arabiya
Friday 26 October 2018

Q: Mr Martin Griffiths, Secretary-General Special Envoy to Yemen, welcome to Al Arabiya Sir

A: Thank you very much, thank you for having me

Q: Thank you sir, we understand that you draw a very close link between finding a political solution and fixing the economy. do you believe fixing the economy is now the most important priority and are you in Washington DC this week working on trying to fix the Yemeni economy?

A: I think fixing the economy is a priority in the context of the peril that Yemen now faces of famine. and as you know on Tuesday in the security council in new York mark Lowcock for the united nations spoke I think passionately about the fears that we all have of famine coming to Yemen and making the situation impossibly more difficult and possibly more tragic and the economy has a critical role to play in either negatively causing that or helping to cause that famine or constructively helping us all to prevent it or limit it or to mitigate it. So, the economy for me is an immediate issue of great priority, it does not compete with the political issue, it is separate, but it is imperative. And my message here in Washington is partly that we must now hasten our efforts to avert the threat of famine as we have just been discussing but also to say look in all this darkness that the people of Yemen face there is a story of hope and my job as you and I have discussed before is to bring that message of hope.

And what I am saying to officials here at the very senior level is - you have to help me get talks, engagement, consultations restarted on the political solution and I would like to do that and get the parties together in the course of the next month to do that. That's the message of hope for Yemen. political settlement is positive hope and I am asking the U.S government to continue the support that they always give to this message and to understand where I am coming and where I think we need to go.

Q: The Secretary-General was in Washington this week. did he come to meet with you and did you meet him and was he a part of your efforts to convince the doubters that the talks can be rekindled and then we can go forward in Yemen?

A: The Secretary-General is very passionate as again you and I have discussed before about how to resolve the conflict in Yemen. he has personal experience from his time as the high commissioner for refugees in the humanitarian issues which are now taking front and center on Yemen

this gives him a renewed vigour and commitment I think to assist these efforts. my job here is in addition and complementary to his very top level efforts, is to say ok we want a solution in Yemen, we want the talks, here are the things that we need to do today to get there.

Q: Talking about humanitarian (issues) it is indeed right, front and center, Mark Lowcock spoke to the security council on Tuesday this week and he mentioned that 14 million people in Yemen now, it is not 11 million any more, are in need of humanitarian assistance to survive. Because of food insecurity and acute malnutrition and mortality ratios the picture of the humanitarian situation is very bleak indeed and he put 5 criteria or areas he would like to see implemented to help first of all, I am sure you have heard them and you know them well:

first of all cessation of hostilities in and all around infrastructure and facilities for aid operations,

2 protection of food and essential goods supplies,

3 larger and faster injection of foreign exchange into the economy through the central bank, and

4 increased funding and support for humanitarian operations, and

5 call for full re-engagement with the special envoy, yourself sir, to end the conflict.

you did not ask for cessation of hostilities which is number 1, your thoughts on the subject sir?

A: I think mark has set out, as he always does, as a tremendous ambassador for the humanitarian issues, he set out a very clear menu of things which are required and as you said the cessation of hostilities came as his first priority. he was very specific. he was not, although we must all hope for a general cessation of hostilities, I am not sure that is on offer at the moment.

but he asked for specific stop the fighting around areas where humanitarian operations are ongoing, where the supplies need to come through, I think that is very practical, that is very measured and if we can achieve that, that would be great. For example, and if it is only one of the places which I think he was referring to, let's make sure that in Hodeida the humanitarian pipeline and the trucks coming off the-taking the goods out of the port to feed the people in the rest of the country, that these trucks are able to get through easily and quickly.

I think that is practical, that is purely humanitarian, I think he is right to ask for that, but the fact that he is needing to make this very broad appeal tells us something very serious. It tells us as is always the case with the potential for famine, famine is a complex and difficult and virtually uncontrollable phenomenon because it is caused not just by a lack of supplies, of goods and food and fuel but it is also caused as you have said, as he said Tuesday, emphasized Tuesday by for example the massive depreciation that we have seen in particular these last couple of months of the currency, of the riyal, food is so much more expensive that even where it exists people cannot afford it and will starve while food is available in the market. That is where famine has a special insult to the human condition. So, I think mark is right, to say there is a package, not a menu, a package of measures which need to be done. I am number 5 there because I think we all agree that a political solution is the sustainable response to the humanitarian situation but there are things that need to be done now. My call in reinforcement of what he is saying, is let us not make these issues political. there is a conflict going on, we will try and settle it, let's deal with the issues of famine in a non-political way.

We are trying as you know to bring the parties together not as representatives of the government of Yemen or Ansarulla but as people concerned to make the central bank of Yemen effective, efficient responsible to need. we are trying to get these people together, we have been doing this for a couple of months. we hope that we can do it in the next 2 or 3 weeks, it will be interesting

because it will be the first time there will be genuine cross party lines response to a major, major issue.

Q: Saudi Arabia has provided USD 200 million this month as a deposit in the central bank of Yemen on top of earlier deposits of USD 3 billion in total in an effort to bolster the currency, the riyal we spoke about, the riyal used to be 200 to the dollar a year ago and now is 700 to the dollar and the inflation has gone wild, and actually inflation could be a weapon of mass destruction in Yemen. but can we or should we always rely on Saudi generosity, some say no, a Marshall plan is needed for Yemen to recover. Do you agree?

A: I do agree. I think its remarkably good that the Saudi government did that, very, very quickly by the way, when there was a call for injecting money into the economy the Saudis stepped forward with 200 million USD, that is a lot of money in anybody's money and that was most welcome.

I am also very encouraged by the news and I think we were hearing yesterday that the emirates is coming forward to pay the salaries of some of the civil servants and teachers I think. and this is phenomenally welcome, it is welcome by any standards in humanitarian terms, but I think you are right, I think it is the international community which needs to respond globally to this problem that we are facing of the economy because it is in dire straits as you have been saying. It is great that the Saudis are leading the charge in this and we must give them all the credit they deserve for that.

I hope that they will also lead the charge with me on political issues as I think they will. but I think the response to the currency problem as Mark Lowcock said Tuesday it is an international issue now. Famine will destabilize Yemen as well as kill Yemenis. destabilizing Yemen is a threat to international peace and security - stopping the famine is an international priority.

Q: Actually the 70 million USD this week donated jointly by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are to pay the salaries of 135,000 teachers all over Yemen, which is really good news for us. but I would like to move here now to the new government of Dr Maeen Abdulmalik which took place, he was the replacement to Ahmed bin Daghr, the former prime minister who is now referred to investigation. You welcomed the appointment of Maeen Abdulmalik by twitter on your account and you describe him as a professional. do you expect him to call for a meeting of donors to work on creating a Marshall plan for Yemen?

A: I was very, very encouraged by the appointment of Maeen Abdulmalik and I said so publicly but I also had a very good discussion with him directly and my colleague met him in Riyadh a couple of days ago, I hope to go and see him in Aden soon. he is very good news. here is a man who is young, is active, he is incredibly energetic and as minister of public works he, in the middle of war was actively engaged in rebuilding infrastructure for the benefit of Yemenis, he is a great choice. and I know his overwhelming priority is to make the government services work for the people of Yemen, we must all support that. I would not want to give him instructions as to how he would approach the international community. all I would say is that his appointment is a message to the international community that there is somebody here they can seriously get around and support.

Q: I would like to move now to shuttle diplomacy you have been conducting. since last time we met and we talked to each other here in New York around this time a month ago you have been engaged in shuttle diplomacy that included capitals in the gulf and around the world. Can you tell us and our viewers, have these talks produced tangible results so far that give you optimism for the future?

A: My mandate primarily is to bring the parties together to engage on measures which will resolve the conflict and satisfy the needs both of the people of Yemen, the neighboring states, the international community. In a way it is a simple mandate. I hope very soon to be able to announce a restart of those consultations. I would like to see them happening in November. We have a couple of options in Europe as venues for those consultations. I am hopeful that, and I say this because of course I have been discussing this in detail as you point out, with all the actors involved, including the government of Yemen, President Hadi, as well as in Sanaa and the coalition. I hope that those consultations will now focus on substance, on the framework that you may recall I put the elements to the security council on the 18th of June, we have been updating that document and I hope it sets out the elements of the eventual solution. I want to, on the basis of these discussions, put that on the table, the agenda for the next consultations. So I am moving forward, we have got some logistical issues to resolve, but with goodwill and in the context of the crisis in Yemen, I think we will make it.

Q: I am very glad that you are moving ahead with the plans to hold direct or indirect talks between the parties regardless of the place whether it is Kuwait, Oman, Geneva, Vienna or even Nairobi, and they will be first talks since Kuwait talks in 2016, and you seem to have assurances that the Houthis will attend this time and there will not be last minute demands. is that the case?

A: I hope and think and believe and plan that going into these next round of consultations there will be no surprises in terms of logistics or non-attendance. I am sure this will take place. I have had a whole range of discussions with the Ansarulla leadership on this. I know they are committed to come and I have to resolve one or two logistical issues to make sure that the way in which they do come is considered safe by them, and they have the right to have that consideration and respect for their anxieties about their travel for example, so I think we are going to sort that out. But as you said, the point I want to make here is this: bringing the parties together after two years is never going to be simple. a war of this kind, a conflict of this kind in Yemen breeds hatred and lack of confidence. Bringing them together in contrast is finally a story of hope for the people of Yemen who are so oppressed by the situation, now by the prospect of famine. My job is to sort of shine a light, if you like, to see that there is a tunnel, as the saying goes, at the end of the tunnel there may be peace in Yemen. That is what I hope to begin to produce in the month of November. as you say the first serious engagement between the parties since Kuwait two years ago, it is very, very important. it is not easy, it won't be a quick or an easy road, but it is the road that we must start the travel on.

Q: Mr. Martin Griffiths forgive me for being a nosy journalist, do I understand now that these talks will be held before the end of the year, and somewhere like in Geneva or Vienna?

A: You are never a nosy journalist, you are a highly professional communicator to the people of the region and Yemen. yes. It is essential for me that these talks are held before the end of the year. I would like to and my hope is that they will happen in November. That is soon. but my hope is November. I am going to security council on the 16th of November and I hope to be able to provide the council on that day with firm dates and progress towards making that happen securely, reasonably and surely, and it will be in Europe, indeed.

Q: The 3 confidence building measures that you determined are the best way to go forward to build trust between the two sides, are they still the 3 same building measures or have there been changes to them, which were: detainee release, payment of salaries and opening of Sanaa airport. any progress on these three?

A: Yes. We have been discussing this in some details and we put proposals in writing in front of the government of Yemen and I have had some very good meetings with vice president Ali Mohsen for example and former Prime Minister Bin Daghr and now the new Prime Minister. We have proposals in writing on all three. We have made progress just this week on the first one, the release of detainees and prisoners, where we have a new agreement which brings together both sides on a process for fast tracking the release of prisoners which both sides agree as a priority and a humanitarian priority. On the airport I am waiting for the moment that I can publicly say we will now start the process leading to the opening of Sanaa airport, which will require certification

and technical assessment but leading to a horizon where the people in the north of Yemen will be able to travel more freely. And then of course on the economy

it is almost not a confidence building measure payment of salaries based on a better use of currency and revenue is more than a confidence building measure, as we can see it is an essential priority. And this one, the last one, as reported we want to bring representatives from Sanaa along with the governor of the central bank Mohammed Zammam to a meeting as soon as possible maybe in Nairobi, maybe Berlin, it does not really matter where it is, to urgently address the economic issues we have been discussing today. so I am hoping that that will happen soon, I insist to the parties that this should not be a political issue. Bringing these people together is a humanitarian priority. This is not politics, this about the people of Yemen and it is essential.

Now these confidence-building measures should not get in the way of my primary focus which is on updating and renewing and engaging the parties on the framework for resolving the conflict. That is my main job and I hope and believe and plan that in November we will see light on that matter too and a reconvening of consultations.

Q: will they be direct or indirect consultations?

A: I would like to hope that they should be direct. There is no substitute for people talking to each other in this business and I have learned this over many, many years of doing that in many, many conflicts around the world. Yemenis talking to each other, there is a certain magic about it.

They are able to communicate in ways of course foreigners never can, that is true in any conflict. Our business is to put these two parties together and let them talk through their differences and guide them towards areas of agreement. So ideally direct but it needs both parties to agree, it takes two to tango, and both parties would need to agree that they are comfortable enough with each other to sit down in the same room, obviously that is what I would like to see happen.

Q: I have one more question about your expected visit to Taiz province next Sunday, this area has been suffering from the siege by the Houthi militias since Wednesday 17 October. What do you expect to achieve by this visit?

A: I am very glad you raised the issue of Taiz and I want to go there as soon as possible. My aim in going to Taiz is really quite simple. Yemenis from all parts of the political spectrum have urged me to focus on Taiz as a place where peace is built locally, and the parties in Taiz have been dealing with each other, have been talking about cross line work, improving humanitarian access, corridors for the movement of people to be able to get to work across the front line.

my aim I going to Taiz and I hope to go to Taiz and visit both sides of the conflict line, is to emphasize the great work that has been done there under the leadership of the governor and his deputies and also with the local commanders of Ansarulla and show that actually Yemenis can fix things and ask them what support they need from me, and from the international community. I would like Taiz to show us what the future can bring.

Q: Thank you Martin Griffiths, Secretary-General special envoy to Yemen for this interview, as always you are very welcome always on al Arabiya, thank you so much sir.

A: Thank you very much indeed, thanks for the opportunity.