

Syria conference to open 22 January in Montreux, UN confirms

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The long-sought international peace conference on Syria is set to begin on 22 January with a one-day meeting in the Swiss town of Montreux, the United Nations confirmed today.

The conference, originally scheduled to take place in Geneva, will now be held in two parts, with the opening session in Montreux, and, after a day's break, moving on 24 January to the world body's headquarters in Geneva. The conference will bring the Syrian Government and the opposition to a negotiating table for the first time since the conflict started in March 2011.

"After the date had been chosen, it was realized that there would be other events taking place in Geneva at the same time," said Khawla Mattar, spokeswoman for Joint Special Representative of the UN and the League of Arab States, Lakhdar Brahimi, who is organizing the conference.

The World Economic Forum is due to begin in Davos on 22 January with officials and VIPs passing through Geneva, as well as at least one trade fair planned in Geneva.

Rather than change the date, which was selected due to the urgency expressed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and the agreement by the initiating countries, the United States and Russia, the first day of the conference was be moved to Montreux.

The town, renowned for its legendary jazz festival, was selected due to "logistics, security, availability of accommodation and conference facilities," Ms. Mattar said.

“The first part in Montreux ...delegations of all invited countries...would have an opportunity to express their views on the issue,” she explained, adding that the second part, in Geneva, would then be restricted to only to the two Syrian delegations and Joint Special Representative Brahimi.

The talks would not be open-ended, and a time frame would be set once the negotiations started, Ms. Mattar announced.

Further details are expected to be discussed on Friday in a trilateral meeting between Mr. Brahimi and officials from the United States and Russia.

The trilateral group, due to meet at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, would then be joined by permanent representatives of other permanent members of the Security Council – China, France and the United Kingdom – as well as of the League of Arab States, European Union and Syria’s immediate neighbours – Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey.

In addition to logistics, the meeting will discuss items such as the list of countries to be invited, and the compositions of the Syrian Government and opposition delegations.

“The JSR would like to know the names of participants as soon as possible, by the end of the year the latest, so that he could commence preliminary consultations with them,” Ms. Mattar said referring to Mr. Brahimi.

Over 100,000 people have been killed and 8 million driven from their homes, 2 million of them seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, since the conflict first erupted in March 2011 between forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and initially peaceful opponents seeking to oust him.

The goal of the so-called “Geneva II” conference will be to achieve a political solution to the conflict through a comprehensive agreement between the Government and the opposition for the full implementation of the Geneva communiqué, adopted after the first international meeting on the issue on 30 June 2012, which called for the creation of a transitional government that would lead to holding elections.

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