Foreign Minister Steinmeier on five years of civil war in Syria and on the announcement of the partial withdrawal of Russian troops

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Speaking in Berlin, Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier issued the following statement on the announcement of the partial withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria and the fifth anniversary (15 March 2016) of the protests against the Assad regime in Syria:

What began five years ago as a peaceful protest against corruption and tyranny has, fanned by religious hatred and the relentless grappling for regional supremacy, mutated into not only one of the most brutal conflicts but also the crisis with the most serious consequences in recent times. More than 250,000 people have died, more than ten million have fled their homes; Syria’s cities and cultural treasures have been reduced to ash and rubble. In our country, too, we are seeing the impact of the crisis in our stations, schools and sport halls.

It is a sombre anniversary. And yet, today, for the first time in five years, there is a glimmer of hope that an end to the violence is possible. For more than two weeks now, the ceasefire that we agreed in Munich one month ago is holding in large parts of the country. Humanitarian supplies have reached many places that were cut off from all assistance for months on end. Yet all this progress is still extremely fragile. The situation could erupt again anywhere at any time.

Every small step forward we have taken over the last weeks has been achieved through concerted pressure from outside, on the basis of understanding between the international and regional stakeholders in Vienna and Munich. This understanding and this pressure will be even more crucial when those around the table in Geneva soon have to wrestle with the most difficult questions regarding Syria’s political future.

If the ceasefire is a sign that, after five years of war, the conflict parties are finally weary of fighting and concede that no one can win this conflict by military means, there is hope that after five years it will now finally be possible to embark on the search for a political solution.

And if the announcements of the withdrawal of Russian troops materialise, the pressure will increase on President Assad’s regime to at last start to negotiate seriously in Geneva on a peaceful political transition which will preserve the Syrian state and the interests of all population groups.

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