

Speech by Foreign Minister Steinmeier at the Syria peace conference in Montreux, 22 January 2014

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Mr. Secretary General,

Thank you for giving me the floor.

This year, dear colleagues, we commemorate the beginning of the First World War. We mourn the unnecessary death of millions of soldiers. We turn silent in the face of the tremendous suffering of millions of civilians. This great tragedy reminds us of the dramatic consequences when diplomacy and efforts for a political solution fail. As many of you said: The war in Syria is already a humanitarian catastrophe. Over a hundred thousand people have been killed. Millions of Syrians have fled their country or are internally displaced. The suffering of the Syrian people needs to stop.

War is always man-made. And it can only be stopped by man. Today's meeting must be a first step toward resolving this conflict. The attendance of so many Ministers is a sign of support for the Syrian people and of the will of the international community to back peace.

I would like to thank the Secretary General as well as Secretary Kerry, Minister Lawrow and the Joint Special Envoy, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, for bringing us all together today. The expectations of the international public are extremely high and known by all of us. But we have to be very clear in the first place: the primary responsibility for the disaster in Syria lies with the Syrian political leaders. The Syrian regime has used brutal force against peaceful demonstrators. It has fuelled confessional hatred and extremism. It has targeted civilians with military weapons, including the use of chemical weapons on 21 August 2013. And we as Germany feel the responsibility to join the efforts of many of those, who are now destroying these weapons.

The ongoing violence has created spaces for terrorism which has become a serious problem in Syria. We commend the efforts of the Syrian opposition groups to fight groups linked to al-Qaida, such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. We expect the government in Damascus to also take a strong stance against these groups.

Today's conference builds on the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012. Our joint goal is to negotiate a transitional governing body with full executive powers. This body should lead the transition towards a peaceful, pluralistic, democratic Syria, a Syria that meets the hopes of the Syrian people.

While the negotiations are ongoing, we need to redouble our efforts to immediately alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people. Public support for the negotiation process can only be won if people can see improvements on the ground.

We strongly encourage the parties to agree on local ceasefires, the exchange of prisoners, and the unimpeded humanitarian access to all places in Syria. The use of heavy weapons and the cynical "starve or surrender" strategy by the regime need to stop. All parties must strictly abide by the principles of international humanitarian law.

The international community must be ready to support any agreement with prompt support for rehabilitation and reconstruction. Germany stands ready – as we have throughout the conflict – to help our Syrian friends and the international institutions wherever we can. But the conditions for effective aid can only be provided for by the parties themselves.

Finally: Peace is never won easily. I call on the Syrian delegations to be courageous, ambitious and serious in their quest for peace. The delegation led by the Syrian National Coalition has already proven their courage by coming here today, against many odds and in the face of ongoing violence.

I do hope that everybody will show the same sense of responsibility for the Syrian people. It lies in your and our hands to build a better future for Syria and to end the suffering of the Syrian people.

It might be hard to overcome the obstacles and obstructions. But, and to conclude: The memory of the pictures of the victims doesn't allow any despondency, reluctance or resignation. We must achieve success with our efforts here and wherever in the next days and weeks.

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