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## UN CANNOT CONFIRM DELAY IN SYRIAN PEACE TALKS

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Russia's foreign minister, however, has said the talks in Geneva will be pushed back until the end of next month. Could a delay give Russian and US presidents time to line up their views on the country's future?

"There is no confirmation that the February talks are postponed," Yara Sharif, a spokesperson for Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura, said Friday. "We're going to be sure when the special envoy is back" from talks next week with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, she added.

Her statement rebuts Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's announcement earlier the same day that the UN-backed Syria peace talks scheduled to take place in Geneva on February 8 would be put on hold until the end of the month. He did not give a reason for the delay.

International leaders had agreed to re-open talks in the UN-headquarter city during the peace talks in Astana that wrapped up on Tuesday with the agreement of ceasefire-maintenance mechanism but without making significant ground in ending the six-year war.

Lavrov's meeting with Syrian government opponents did not include a representative of the High Negotiations Committee, the main opposition coalition group that took part in both the recent Astana talks as well as the Geneva peace talks of 2016.

Phone date?

Moscow also announced tentative plans for US President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin to hold a phone conversation on Saturday.

Will a change in the White House influence the future of Syrian peace talks?

When asked by Russian news agencies whether such a call could take place, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded "yes" without giving any further details.

If the call takes place, it will mark the first conversation between the Russian and American presidents since Trump's entry into office. The ongoing war in Syria is likely to be one of the issues the two leaders would discuss. The pair spoke in November 2016 following Trump's election, signaling the possibility for closer cooperation between Moscow and Washington in what would be a striking U-turn from President Obama's policies towards Russia, which included sanctions due to the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014 and alleged interference in US elections.

Trump has also stated he would be open to working with Russia to bring the conflict in Syria to an

end. However, the American commander-in-chief's plan to create safe zones in Syria for civilians, a move that would likely require ground troops and the creation of no-fly zones, may not line up with stated Russian plans for its military involvement in Syria.

Peskov stated that such a plan had not yet been discussed between the US and Russia and its consequences "ought to be weighed up."

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Kaynak/Source: