Less than 30 days before the newly-formed Constitutional Committee for Syria meets in Geneva to try to agree on a new foundational text, as one of the building blocks for lasting peace in the war-ravaged country, UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen acknowledged that progress depends on overcoming several obstacles, from the release of prisoners, to a reduction in violence and insecurity.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, Pedersen appeared upbeat – but realistic - about the upcoming face-to-face meeting of the 150-member body, featuring 50 representatives each from the Government, opposition and civil society.

“The good news is we will meet here on 30 October and hopefully have a successful beginning,” he said. “A Committee in itself will not solve the crisis in Syria, and I think no-one has ever said that. But what we have said is of course a Constitution could help to bridge differences within the Syrian society, it could help to build trust and it could also be a door-opener to the broader political process.”

A smaller, 45-person body consisting of 15 Government, 15 opposition and 15 civil society members will also meet separately in the Swiss city to prepare and draft proposals, Mr. Pedersen explained, in line with agreed terms that are framed by the key principles of respect for the UN Charter, Security Council resolutions, Syria’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

At the same time, the Syria Envoy acknowledged the need to address concerns about ongoing clashes in Idlib, where Government forces stepped up their military campaign in April, as well as insecurity concerns elsewhere.
After more than eight and a half years of war, hundreds of thousands of Syrians are believed to have been killed in the fighting. Millions more have fled the country, which has also suffered massive destruction that’s likely to cost at least $400 billion to rebuild, UN experts said in 2018.

Focusing on the situation in the formerly largely Kurdish-controlled north-east, on the border with Turkey, the Special Envoy insisted that the situation should be handled “with respect to Syrian sovereignty, independence on territorial integrity”.

In addition, legitimate Turkish security concerns needed to be taken on board, he said, along with respect for all the different communities in the north-east.

“If all of these three issues are addressed, we believe we can be able to move forward,” he said.

Confirming that the Constitutional Committee included Kurdish delegates, Mr. Pedersen insisted that “all segments” of Syrian society were represented, including women, at nearly 30 per cent of the civil society element taking part.

This “unique representative body” alone would take decisions on rewriting the Syrian constitution, the Special Envoy insisted, noting that while he might have “several ideas” about it, he was convinced after meeting the Government and opposition that they were able to “handle this for themselves”.

Reiterating that “we don’t have much time” ahead of the 30 October meeting at United Nations Geneva, Mr. Pedersen also cited the need for the release of more combatants, as a confidence-building measure. To date, there have been four rounds of releases so far, but far greater numbers should be liberated, he suggested.

“Oh obviously this is an issue that is touching too many families in Syria and is causing too much pain,” he explained. “We believe that addressing this …would be an important way forward for the Syrian people. And it would also help us I believe in start to build trust in Syria again.”

Asked about the possibility of a nationwide ceasefire, Mr. Pedersen said that it was something that he and his team was taking “very, very seriously…It’s also linked as I said earlier to the situation in Idlib and the importance of hopefully keeping the calm in Idlib in the days, weeks and months ahead and we believe that a nationwide ceasefire could help to solidify this.”