'Hope of an end in sight' for Syria war: UN investigators

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Geneva: UN investigators welcomed a â€œsignificant decreaseâ€• in violence in Syria on the fifth anniversary of the start of the brutal conflict today, saying they finally glimpsed hope of an end to the war. â€œNow, for the first time, there is hope of an end in sight,â€• said Paulo Pinheiro, head of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

Speaking before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, he hailed the partial ceasefire that has largely held since February 27, saying it had finally allowed many in the country to â€œfeel a return to normalcy in their daily livesâ€•.

â€œThere are, at last, glimpses of a Syria at peace,â€• Pinheiro said, adding that the truce had created the conditions needed to move forward with the new round of peace talks that kicked off in Geneva on Monday.

The temporary ceasefire between Syrian President Bashar al-Assadâ€™s forces and opponents does not cover the Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front jihadist groups.

â€œWe call on the parties to the cessation of hostilities agreement to discontinue all remaining military operations, even those on low-scale,â€• Pinheiro said.

His comments came after Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday ordered most of his forces out of the war-torn nation, in a move greeted by the UNâ€™s mediator in the talks, Staffan de Mistura, as â€œsignificantâ€•.

Putinâ€™s announcement came ahead of todayâ€™s fifth anniversary of the start of a conflict that has left more than 270,000 dead and forced millions to flee their homes.

Almost since the start of the war, the four-member Commission of Inquiry has detailed a litany of horrific abuses committed by all sides in Syria, including allegations of widespread war crimes and crimes against humanity.

It has repeatedly demanded that perpetrators be brought to justice. Pinheiro said he and his colleagues were â€œheartened by the positive developmentsâ€• linked to the ceasefire as well as expanded access for humanitarian aid to besieged areas, but stressed that â€œSerious violations continue to take placeâ€•.

â€œThousands are detained and tortured, many dying in places of detention. Countless numbers of people are still missing,â€• he said. IS jihadists continue to use suicide bombs in civilians areas, he added.

â€œParticularly horrifying is (ISâ€™s) continued sexual enslavement of Yazidi women and girls, over 3,000 who are still held by the terrorist group,â€• he said, reiterating a call for â€œcredible international or domestic criminal proceedingsâ€• over the war.

â€œWhen we speak with the victims whose lives have been torn apart by this conflict, their message is clear. They want peace, and they demand justice,â€• Pinheiro said.

- PTI