SYRIAN GOVERNMENT OFF TO GOOD START WITH OPCW, BUT WHY IS PEACE CONFERENCE SIX WEEKS AWAY?

The Washington Post reports this morning that the Syrian government has been "businesslike and efficient" in its dealings with the OPCW and that things are on track for representatives from the OPCW to be inside Syria tomorrow to start working on the details of destroying Syria's chemical weapon stockpile. Considering how rapidly the UN Security Council resolution passed unanimously on Friday evening was put together, though, it remains a mystery to me why the UN is waiting until mid-November for a peace conference to begin in Geneva.

The good news from OPCW:

> Inspectors from the Hague-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said they would arrive in Damascus midday Tuesday and spend a week in the city before starting visits to chemical weapons facilities declared by the Syrian government. The OPCW officials said the details of the Syrian declaration appeared to line up with external intelligence assessments of what the government possesses, giving them optimism that the regime was being cooperative.
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> "It's been good business so far," said an OPCW official, speaking at a briefing for reporters under the condition of anonymity. "So far, our interactions with the Syrians have been very businesslike and efficient."

The difficulties that the inspectors will face

underline why I have been stating all along that a ceasefire is an important component of destroying the chemical weapons:

> Another OPCW official said inspection teams may not even be able to reach every declared chemical weapons site because of security concerns. The inspectors will be working with unarmed U.N. security guards and under the protection of Syrian government forces, but significant portions of Syrian territory are not under the full control of Assad's military.
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> "It may be that we are not in a position to go to some of these locations," the official said. "We are not a military unit."

It is difficult to tell from the phrasing here whether some of the sites where the inspection teams will work are under rebel control or whether the teams merely need to pass through rebel-held territory in order to reach sites still under government control. In either case, a ceasefire would make the work much more likely to be successful.

Even though it appears that the teams intend to destroy the equipment that Syria could use to do the final mixing of the two chemical precursors composing the bulk of Syria's chemical weapons by November 1, much work will still be needed to destroy the chemicals themselves. Waiting until mid-November to start the peace conference seems a poor choice to me:

> The United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Saturday urged the National Coalition for the Syrian opposition forces to reach out to other groups and forge an agreement on a united delegation for an upcoming peace conference in Geneva. Reports suggest that the peace conference will be held in mid-November. Hectic parleys are on

> in New York, to firm up the exact date, which is expected to be finalised this week. Meanwhile, it was known that Iran may also participate in the peace talks.
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> In his meeting with Ahmad al-Jarba, president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, in New York on Saturday, the Secretary-General welcomed the opposition's commitment to send a delegation to the upcoming peace conference.
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> Ban "urged the National Coalition to reach out to other opposition groups and agree on a representative and united delegation," states the readout issued by the Secretary-General's spokesperson.

If we break through all the noise about chemical weapons, the humanitarian crisis of the Syrian war is huge:

> Since March 2011, the Syrian civil war has claimed over 100,000 lives. The civil war has displaced over 4 million people within Syria and sent more that 2 million people fleeing for safety to neighbouring countries.

Let's hope that this peace conference is more successful than the last one:

> A first Syria peace conference was held in Geneva in June 2012. The 2012 conference agreed that there should be a transitional government in Syria with full executive powers and called for a new conference to decide how to implement the accord.

The fact that Iran, a strong ally of the Assad government, is likely to take in part in this conference seems to bode well for it to make real progress on bringing hostilities to an end.

I just wish the timing were more in concert with the planned actions on rounding up and disposing of the chemical weapon precursors.