

Russia Criticizes West on Syria

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Syrians who live in Jordan shouting slogans against Syrian President Bashar Assad during a rally in Amman. **Majed Jaber**

Russia accused Western nations of undermining the chances for a peaceful resolution in Syria on Monday, saying the West was urging President Bashar Assad's opponents not to seek compromise with the government.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's remarks were the latest sign of support for Assad from Russia, which joined China last month in vetoing a Western-drafted UN Security Council resolution condemning his government's eight-month crackdown on protests.

Lavrov reiterated Russia's position that opponents of Assad share responsibility for the violence and should face concerted international pressure to enter talks with the government, Russian news agencies reported.

"Yes, it's necessary to stop the violence, but these demands must be addressed both to the authorities and to armed groups that have mixed in with the Syrian opposition," Interfax quoted Lavrov as saying.

"We see a situation in which the Arab League is calling for an end to violence and the start of talks, while absolutely contradictory calls are coming from Western capitals and the capitals of some regional countries," he said.

Those nations, which Lavrov did not name, are "directly recommending that the opposition not enter dialogue with the Assad regime," he said, Interfax reported. "This is like a political provocation on an international scale."

Moscow has close ties to Syria, which has been a big buyer of Russian weapons and hosts a Russian naval maintenance facility on the Mediterranean, a rare outpost abroad for the Russian military.

Russia has called on Assad to implement promised reforms faster, but says his resignation must not be a condition for dialogue in Syria and has accused Western nations of trying to set the stage for armed intervention.

Assad, battling eight months of protests against his rule, faces street demonstrations, increasing armed opposition, deepening international isolation and an economic crisis triggered by the unrest and aggravated by Western sanctions.

But despite reports of army conscript desertions, he has retained the loyalty of most military officers and government officials and says he will not bow to international pressure to stop a crackdown on foes he describes as "armed terrorists."

The United Nations says 3,500 people have been killed in the crackdown. Authorities blame armed groups and say 1,100 police and soldiers have been killed.

Assad has promised parliamentary elections early next year, followed by a new constitution.

Syria has banned most foreign journalists from entering Syria and prevented the media from moving freely in the country, making it nearly impossible to independently confirm events on the ground.

The Free Syrian Army, which claims to have more than 15,000 defectors in its ranks, is controversial among protesters involved in the uprising. Many in the opposition want the protesters to remain peaceful.

But the Free Syrian Army and others say there are limits to a peaceful uprising, and the time has come to meet the regime's tanks, bullets and tear gas with force.

(Reuters, AP)

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