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# Russian Warships Pay Visit to Syrian Port

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Naval personnel standing Sunday in front of the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov in the city of Tartus.

Two Russian warships arrived in Syria on Sunday, news agencies reported, a visit that will likely be seen as a show of force and a display of support for President Bashar Assad's government.

Five ships, including aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov and destroyer Admiral Chabanenko, put in at Russia's naval maintenance and supply facility in the Syrian port of Tartus, Interfax said.

The ships were to be on their way on Monday, a Navy spokesman was cited by the news agency as saying. Earlier reports said the vessels, part of a group of Russian ships currently in the Mediterranean, were expected to spend several days at the Tartus facility, one of the Russian Navy's few outposts abroad.

The stop is nominally billed as a "business visit," but Syrian news agency SANA cited

an unnamed Russian officer in Tartus as saying the visit was to strengthen ties between Moscow and Damascus.

Russia has maintained support for the increasingly isolated Assad during a nearly 10-month-long uprising against his rule. The United Nations estimates the government crackdown has killed more than 5,000 people.

Russia joined China in October in blocking passage of a Western-crafted U.N. Security Council resolution that would have condemned Assad's government for the crackdown, saying Assad's militant opponents share the blame.

Syria has been a major recipient of Russian weapons, accounting for 7 percent of Russia's total of $10 billion in arms deliveries abroad in 2010, according to the Moscow think tank CAST.

Russian media had reported in November that the Admiral Kuznetsov would call at Tartus.

*(Reuters, MT)*

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