

Russia Touts Arab Observers

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Russia said Tuesday that Arab League monitors are playing a stabilizing role in Syria, disagreeing with Syrian opposition figures who say the mission has only given President Bashar Assad more time to crush opponents.

Moscow welcomed an Arab League decision to continue the two-week-old mission to monitor implementation of the government's pledge to stop a crackdown the United Nations says has killed more than 5,000 people in 10 months of protests.

"Their deployment is already exerting a stabilizing influence on the situation and helping to provide a truthful and objective picture of what is happening," a Russian Foreign Ministry online statement said of the observers.

It repeated Russian calls for dialogue between Assad's government and his opponents.

Separately, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov urged Arab League observers to focus their efforts on the actions of both Syrian authorities and protesters during their mission.

After a review meeting on Sunday, the Arab League said Damascus had only partly carried out

a pledge to stop the bloodshed, free detainees and withdraw troops from cities that have been hotbeds of anti-Assad unrest. It said the number of observers would grow to 200 this week from 165.

Opposition figures said Monday that the presence of the mission was counterproductive, giving Damascus more time to suppress its adversaries violently. There has been no apparent reduction in the bloodshed since monitors arrived on Dec. 26.

In his first public speech for more than six months, Assad on Tuesday blamed "foreign planning" for the uprising and vowed to strike "terrorists with an iron fist."

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