The Moscow Times
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Russia Says Arms Sales to Syria Will Continue Despite Uproar

March 13, 2012



A senior defense official said Tuesday that Russia sees no reason to curtail military cooperation with the Syrian government despite calls from the West to stop arming President Bashar Assad's regime.

Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said Russia will abide by existing contracts to deliver weapons to Syria.

He told reporters that Russia enjoys "good, strong military technical cooperation with Syria, and we see no reason to reconsider it."

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday that those battling the Syrian government must lay down their arms at the same time as government forces and face equal demands to withdraw from their positions.

"This must be simultaneous. There must not be a situation where it is demanded that the government leave cities and towns and this is not demanded of armed groups," Lavrov

said a day after sparring with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the United Nations over how to stop the Syrian conflict. "A unilateral withdrawal of government forces is absolutely unrealistic."

Russia has blocked UN sanctions over Assad's yearlong crackdown on the opposition in which an estimated 7,500 people have been killed.

Lavrov's call came as the UN said it would soon deploy human rights monitors in countries bordering Syria to collect eyewitness testimony on "atrocities" committed in the country.

"We will be sending monitors for documentation of atrocities in bordering countries later this week," Kyung-wha Kang, Deputy UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told the UN Human Rights Council during a debate on the Syrian crisis.

The UN refugee agency in Geneva also said Tuesday that some 230,000 Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of violence last year.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees' coordinator for Syria says 30,000 people have already fled to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan and "on a daily basis hundreds of people are still crossing into neighboring countries."

Panos Moumtzis told reporters that according to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent at least 200,000 people are also displaced within the country.

He says some 110,000, mostly Iraqi refugees living in Syria are meanwhile reporting increased hardship due to rising prices for basic goods.

Moumtzis says prices for imported goods have "skyrocketed" because of the devaluation of the Syrian pound.

In Ankara, UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan said he was expecting to hear a response from the Syrian government on Tuesday on the "concrete proposals" he made to end the violence during weekend talks with Assad.

Annan has not disclosed what those proposals entailed.

Syria's ambassador to Moscow said Monday that the discussion between Assad and Annan had echoed 'five principles' for a Syrian settlement agreed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Arab League foreign ministers in Cairo on Saturday.

(AP, Reuters)

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