

Russia Offers to Back Annan's Syria Plan

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Russia said Tuesday that it's ready to support a United Nations resolution endorsing Kofi Annan's plan for settling the Syrian crisis, signaling that it is prepared to raise the pressure on its old ally.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that the resolution shouldn't turn into an ultimatum to the Syrian government, setting the stage for tough bargaining over the wording of the document at the UN Security Council. But Lavrov's statement appeared to indicate growing impatience with Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia and China have twice shielded Assad's regime from UN sanctions over its yearlong crackdown on protesters, in which more than 8,000 have died. But the Kremlin has also offered strong support to Annan, the former United Nations secretary-general who is joint UN and Arab League special envoy.

Annan has met twice with Assad earlier this month and made proposals to end the bloodshed, which haven't yet been made public.

Lavrov said Annan's proposals should now be unveiled, adding that Moscow stands ready

to back a UN Security Council resolution supporting them.

"The Security Council should support them not as an ultimatum, but as a basis for the continuing efforts by Kofi Annan aimed at reaching accord between all Syrians, the government and all opposition groups on all key issues, such as humanitarian corridors, halting hostilities by all parties, the beginning of a political dialogue and offering access to the media," Lavrov said following the talks in Moscow with his Lebanese counterpart.

Lavrov said over the weekend that Annan's plan doesn't contain a demand for Assad to step down. On Tuesday, he reaffirmed Russia's call for a simultaneous cease-fire by the government and the opposition forces.

Lavrov also said a Russian Navy oil tanker anchored at the Syrian port of Tartus is on a mission to assist Russian Navy ships on anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. He scoffed at media reports alleging a Russian military buildup in Syria, saying the group of servicemen on board the tanker is intended to protect it from pirates in the waters off Africa's coast.

Lavrov's statement followed Moscow's strong call on the Syrian government to open humanitarian corridors that would allow the International Committee of the Red Cross treat the victims of the fighting. Moscow also urged Damascus to grant the Red Cross access to jailed protesters.

Russia had previously backed the ICRC's call for a cease-fire, but Monday's statement from the Foreign Ministry that followed Lavrov's talks with the ICRC chief was worded more strongly than the previous ones.

Speaking before the Duma last week, Lavrov criticized Assad for being too slow to implement long-needed reforms and warned that the conflict in the Arab state could spiral out of control.

He also complained in a weekend interview with state television about the "disproportionate" use of force by government troops and said Moscow disagrees with many of the decisions made by the Syrian leadership.

"We are supporting the need to start a political process, and to do that it's necessary to have a cease-fire first," Lavrov said. "Russia will do everything for that, irrespective of the decisions made by the Syrian government. We disagree with many of those, by the way."

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