

Syria 'Settlement Process' Being Negotiated

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A Russian diplomat said Monday that Moscow was working with the Syrian authorities to seek an end to violence and the start of talks with their opponents.

But he stopped short of publicly pressing the government to meet a military withdrawal deadline.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moualem arrived in Moscow on Monday and was to meet his Russian counterpart Tuesday, the deadline for Syrian government forces to start withdrawing from cities and towns under mediator Kofi Annan's peace plan.

Moscow is "working actively with Damascus in order to begin a political settlement process in [Syria]," Itar-Tass quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov as saying.

He reiterated Russia's opposition to interference in Syria, where it says any change in the government must result from an internal Syrian political process and not pressure from foreign countries calling for President Bashar Assad's resignation.

"Attempts to force a solution on Syria from outside will lead only to an escalation of tension. Everything must follow from respect for Syria's sovereignty, and violence must be stopped," Gatilov said.

Russia has been under pressure from Western and Arab nations to use its ties with Syria to help ensure that Assad abides by the deal brokered by Annan, the joint UN-Arab League envoy.

The deal calls on Syria to begin withdrawing its troops from around towns and cities by 6 a.m. local time Tuesday and for a truce to start 48 hours later.

Gatilov said "there are concrete points in [Annan's plan], and we fully support this plan," Interfax reported.

Syria has agreed to the deadlines but on Sunday demanded written guarantees that insurgents will stop fighting before it pulls back troops, raising questions about its intentions to follow through.

Russia has frequently said much blame for the bloodshed lies with rebels and their supporters and has emphasized that armed government opponents must also stop fighting.

Russia has protected Assad by vetoing two UN Security Council resolutions condemning his government for bloodshed in which the United Nations says its forces have killed more than 9,000 people since a crackdown on protests began in March 2011.

But Russia has championed Annan's mission, backing two Security Council statements in its support, and has tried to distance itself from Assad lately in a sign that it wants to retain diplomatic clout and prepare for any outcome.

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