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Russia to Suspend New Arms to Syria

By The Moscow Times

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Syrian opposition leader Michel Kilo waiting to meet with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in the ministry Monday. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

Russia will not deliver fighter planes or other new weapons to Syria while the situation there remains unresolved, the deputy director of a body that supervises the country's arms trade said Monday.

"While the situation in Syria is unstable, there will be no new deliveries of arms there," Vyacheslav Dzirkaln told journalists at the Farnborough Airshow in Britain, Interfax and RIA-Novosti reported.

A refusal to send more arms to Syria could signal the strongest move yet by Moscow to distance itself from Syrian President Bashar Assad, whom it has defended in the UN Security Council from harsher sanctions.

It could also scuttle up to $4 billion of outstanding contracts, including fighter jets and air defense systems that were expected to be delivered this year.

A spokesman for Dzirkaln's Federal Service for Military Technical Cooperation would not confirm the deputy director's comments when contacted by telephone.

Although completely legal, Russia's arms trade with Syria has fueled concerns that Moscow is supplying Assad with weapons that are being used against protesters taking part in an armed uprising against him.

President Vladimir Putin has said the arms that his country delivers cannot be used in civil conflicts, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said the supplies are defensive weapons sold in contracts signed long ago.

But U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said Russian statements that the weapons are unrelated to the violence in Syria are "patently untrue" and Washington has described the delivery of a heavy Russian weapons shipment as "reprehensible."

Dzirkaln was quoted as saying Russia, one of Syria's main weapons suppliers, would not be delivering a shipment of 36 Yak-130 fighter planes, a contract for which was reportedly signed at the end of last year.

"In the current situation talking about deliveries of airplanes to Syria is premature," he said.

Meanwhile, Putin said Monday that the Syrian government and opposition groups should be "forced" to start a dialogue.

Also Monday, a Syrian opposition leader, Michel Kilo, met with Lavrov at the Foreign Ministry. Kilo, who heads the Democratic Forum opposition group, said that he hopes Russia will play a positive role in "finding a peaceful solution to our crisis."

Members of another opposition group, the Syrian National Council, are expected in Moscow for talks Wednesday.

(Reuters, AP)

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