

Syrian Opposition Blames Russia for Suffering

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A Turkish navy coast guard boat, left, escorting the Navy destroyer Smetlivy in the Bosphorus on Wednesday. **Murad Sezer**

The leader of a prominent Syrian opposition group criticized Russia's position on his country's conflict after talks with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

"The Syrian people are suffering because of Russia, because of the position it has taken, because of its veto in the UN Security Council," Syrian National Council leader Abdelbaset Sieda said at a news conference hours after Wednesday's talks.

Russia opposes international intervention in the conflict, which activists say has killed more than 17,000 people.

And it has used its veto power to block UN condemnations of Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime.

A delegation from the Syrian National Council, the main exiled Syrian opposition group, met

with Lavrov with the aim of pushing Russia to accept Assad's ouster as part of a political transition in Syria.

But Sieda said he saw "no change" in Moscow's opposition to international intervention in Syria.

Along with China, Russia has twice blocked UN condemnations of Syria's government. While saying that it does not support Assad per se, Russia insists that any political transition have the consent of both Assad's government and the opposition.

After meeting with the delegation, Lavrov said, "Syrians themselves must determine their fate."

Lavrov also expressed hope that there would be "a unification of all the [Syrian] opposition groups" for dialogue with the regime.

The Foreign Ministry met with two Syrian opposition delegations Monday and Wednesday, raising hopes that the Russian government was entering a new phase of engagement with the opposition.

On Monday, a government official also said Russia would sell no new weapons to the Assad regime.

But on Tuesday, the Navy said it was sending 11 warships to the Mediterranean, some of which would dock at the Syrian port of Tartus, where Russia has a maintenance and operations base.

The Navy said the ships would take part in training and coordination exercises. But the flotilla's presence will demonstrate Russia's military potential in the region.

(AP, MT)

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