

Assad 'Not Bluffing' About Staying Put, Lavrov Says

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — Syrian President Bashar Assad "is not bluffing" about his determination to stay in power, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in comments broadcast Friday, as the United Nations said arrangements had been made for the release of 21 UN peacekeepers held by Syrian rebels.

Also, the World Food Program said it aims to feed 2.5 million Syrians by next month, up from 1.7 million now. Need has risen sharply as growing numbers of Syrians are displaced by the civil war and as the country's economy disintegrates in the face of the chaos.

The uprising against Assad began two years ago with largely peaceful protests, but shifted into a brutal civil war after a harsh government crackdown on dissent. More than 70,000 people have been killed, according to United Nations estimates.

The conflict has been deadlocked for months, with neither side able to gain the upper hand,

although the rebels have scored a series of strategic victories in recent weeks, seizing a provincial capital in the northeast, capturing the country's largest dam and overrunning a number of smaller military bases.

Russia's Lavrov told the BBC in an interview broadcast Friday that the Syrian leader is digging in and "is not going to leave."

"We know this for sure, and all those who get in touch with him know that he is not bluffing," Lavrov said.

He added that Russia, a close Syria ally, would not pressure Assad to leave.

"It's not for me to decide, it's not for anybody else to decide, except the Syrian people," Lavrov said.

Syria's opposition has criticized the West for not helping arm rebel fighters even as Russia and Iran support the regime with weapons.

Earlier this week, Britain announced that it would provide armored vehicles and other equipment to the rebels, while stopping short of arming them. The West has balked at sending weapons, fearing they could fall into the hands of Islamic extremists fighting in the rebel ranks.

In India, Assad adviser Buthaina Shaaban said Britain's decision would only prolong the fighting. She alleged that most of the rebels are linked to the al-Qaida terror network and conservative Islamic groups.

"Britain should not think that terror activities by such groups in Syria, will not one day go back to haunt Europe or Britain," said Shaaban, who is in India for talks with Indian leaders to rally support for Assad.

Meanwhile, the United Nations said it had made arrangements with all parties for the release of 21 UN peacekeepers, all Filipinos, who were seized by Syrian rebels on Wednesday. The captives were taken to the village of Jamlah, one kilometer from the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, where a UN force has patrolled a cease-fire line between Israel and Syria for nearly four decades.

The parties involved in the arrangements would presumably include both the rebels holding the peacekeepers and government forces reported to be shelling the area.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a media person with the group holding the peacekeepers said the rebels would release them if there were a cease-fire between 10 a.m. and noon Saturday.

The Observatory, which relies on a network of contacts in Syria, said it was expected that teams from the Red Cross and the UN would reach the area Saturday morning.

Josephine Guerrero, a spokeswoman for the UN Peacekeeping Department, said late Friday that a trip to the village where the peacekeepers are being held was aborted Friday because it was considered unsafe.

She said efforts would continue Saturday for their release.

On Friday, UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous told reporters in New York that a possible cease-fire could facilitate the peacekeepers' release.

He said they appear to be safe, but the village was subjected to "intense" shelling by the Syrian armed forces.

In Washington, U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland condemned rebel forces anew for holding the UN peacekeepers, but shared the blame with the Assad regime.

"We have the regime shelling this rebel-held position, further endangering the peacekeepers and making it impossible for UN negotiators to get in there and try to resolve" the situation, she told reporters.

Still, Nuland said that the rebels should free the peacekeepers anyhow and without conditions and that holding them was tarnishing the rebel cause.

The rebels had previously demanded that regime forces withdraw from the area. However, a local activist said Friday via Skype that they could be retrieved by an official UN delegation.

The activist, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, said the rebels felt the peacekeepers were not doing their job in the area since government forces were still shelling and carrying out airstrikes.

"They are guests under the protection of the [rebels] even though their presence in the area was negative and they didn't accomplish what they were here to do, but as soon as someone from the UN comes to get them officially, this will be over," he said.

Last week, rebels from the Martyrs of Yarmouk Brigades, the group holding the peacekeepers, overran several Syrian army checkpoints in the area, said Rami Abdul-Rahman, head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

On Friday, rebels attacked regime forces in the village of Abdeen south of Jamlah, setting off heavy clashes, the Observatory said. Regime helicopters bombed the area, the group said.

Rebels apparently fear that the regime will retake the area if the peacekeepers are released, raising the possibility of a prolonged standoff.

A contingent of more than 300 Filipino peacekeepers is part of the UN force, known as UNDOF.

Since the conflict began, nearly 4 million of Syria's 22 million people have been driven from their homes by the fighting, according to UN estimates. This includes refugees in neighboring countries and some 2 million who have sought shelter inside Syria.

In one recent wave, more than 20,000 families fled fighting in the northeastern Raqqa province, seeking refuge in the neighboring district of Deir ez-Zor, according to the World Food Program.

The UN agency said that in recent days it distributed food to some 20,000 people in public

shelters in Deir ez-Zor. More food trucks are to deliver food there Friday.

In addition to the internally displaced, Syrians who remain in their homes are also in increasing need of food aid, the agency said. The Syrian economy has been hit hard by the two-year-old conflict, and basics such as food and fuel are becoming scarce in many areas.

"The needs are huge and are growing," said Elisabeth Byrs, a spokeswoman for the WFP. "It's kind of a vicious cycle, the collapse of the economy, and more and more people are displaced."

She said the UN agency distributed food to 1.7 million Syrians in February, with the help of local partners. The agency plans to reach 2 million in March and 2.5 million in April, she said.

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