

Russia and U.S. Praise Syrian Disarmament Cooperation

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Lavrov and Kerry discussing the Syrian crisis in Moscow in May 2013. **Maxim Stulov**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Monday praised Syria for complying so far with its obligations to eliminate its chemical weapons and called for an international conference to draft further steps next month.

Following a meeting on the sidelines of an economic summit in Bali, Indonesia, Kerry offered rare praise for Syrian President Bashar Assad, saying the U.S. was "very pleased" with the initial steps Syria has taken toward destroying its estimated 1,000-ton chemical weapons stockpile.

"I think it is extremely significant that yesterday, Sunday, within a week of the resolution being passed, some chemical weapons were already being destroyed," Kerry said at a joint news conference with Lavrov.

Lavrov, whose government has tended to side with the Assad regime, was even more effusive. "Damascus has undoubtedly been cooperating with international inspectors," who began

working in the country Sunday, Lavrov said, Interfax reported. "We have no reason to suspect that the flawless cooperation that the Syrian government has been carrying out will change in any way."

A United Nations Security Council resolution passed Sept. 28 requires Damascus to hand over its chemical weapons, though it stops short of approving the use of force against Syria if it fails to comply.

Striking a note of caution, Kerry said that while Assad deserved credit for allowing international inspectors into the country so quickly after the resolution was passed, this was only the beginning of the process.

Lavrov and Kerry called for a new international conference on Syria's disarmament to be held in Geneva in mid-November, and there is hope that the rebel forces could send representatives, RIA Novosti reported.

"Today we have agreed on the steps that must be taken for the government and the opposition to come to the conference," Lavrov said.

The talks between Lavrov and Kerry were described as "the most productive we have had" by the U.S. secretary of state, and Lavrov said Moscow would "do everything" it could to ensure that Assad complied with the UN resolution, which calls for the eradication of Syria's chemical weapons.

Lavrov also said that Syria's opposition groups could not set preconditions for the talks in Geneva, however, and that they should be prepared to "speak with one voice" at the talks.

International experts from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague and UN experts began the task of destroying Syria's chemical weapons arsenal Sunday.

Their work is part of an agreement made between Washington and Moscow in the wake of a deadly Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack near Damascus, which nearly triggered a U.S. military strike against the Syrian government and ratcheted up international tensions for several weeks.

More than 100,000 people have died in the conflict in Syria since it began in early 2011.

BALI, Indonesia — President Vladimir Putin says that U.S. President Barack Obama's decision to skip a regional summit in Indonesia is "justified" as he tries to end a government shutdown that could rock the world's top economy.

Putin told a CEO conference Monday on the summit's sidelines, "If I were him I would not have come as well. Any leader of a state would have done the same."

For Obama, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting has become a missed opportunity to underline renewed U.S. attention on Asia as a counterbalance to China's increased economic and military clout. The budget impasse forced Obama to stay home.

Putin, who is often at odds with Obama on foreign policy and other issues, says he hopes the U.S. "will recover from this crisis as soon as possible." (*The Associated Press*)

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