

Russia's Syria Ties Boost Humanitarian Aid, Red Cross Says

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Medvedev meeting with Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, on Monday. **Dmitry Astakhov**

Russia's close relations with the Syrian government are helping to boost humanitarian aid to the country's residents and refugees by establishing cooperation between authorities and non-governmental groups, said Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Maurer's statement may be music to Russian officials' ears, as Russia's support for the Syrian government has been more a cause for condemnation than praise in recent months, with Western nations repeatedly slamming Russia for apparently standing by Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime.

Russia's cooperation with the ICRC may signal another victory for Russia, however, as it comes into its own as a donor country.

"In terms of our overall budget and humanitarian needs, we would wish that in the future Russia will be able to contribute much more, but we appreciate that Russia has started to be a contributor. ... Symbolically, it's very important," Maurer said.

Maurer, who took over as the ICRC's president last year, came to Russia on Monday for a two-day visit to meet Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and determine Russia's role in providing humanitarian support to Middle Eastern countries, as well as to discuss mutual projects of the ICRC and the Russian Red Cross with representatives of the latter.

According to Maurer, Russia plays a special role in getting humanitarian aid to all those in need in Syria.

"The Syrian government is very attentive to its relations with Russia, and Russia is concerned about the increasing humanitarian difficulties in Syria, so Russia can help us get access to the Syrian government in order to ensure better cooperation," Maurer told The Moscow Times.

He said that while Russia was promoting the expansion of the ICRC's humanitarian operation within the Syrian government, other countries must ensure that the same thing is happening within the Syrian opposition.

At a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Monday in Bali, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that it was difficult to provide aid to territories under control of the rebels, but that with the help of the ICRC and the UN, the Syrian government could find a way to deliver aid to these territories.

The UN has called on governments to provide humanitarian support to Syria and changed the approach of some of its agencies to help victims of the conflict. According to its estimates, another 2 million Syrians will become refugees in 2014 due to the ongoing conflict, with up to 8.3 million people in need of aid by the end of 2014, Reuters reported Monday.

Maurer said that the ICRC considered its approach distinct and separate from the UN but that it was trying to coordinate properly to ensure that the operations of both organizations were well-suited to each other.

Last year, Russia donated money to the ICRC's operations in the Middle East for the first time, allocating 3 million Swiss francs (\$3.3 million) for humanitarian aid in Syria. The 2013 budget for ICRC operations in Syria is 101.3 million Swiss francs (\$112 million).

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in January that the six-month budget of humanitarian support to Syria within the UN was \$1.5 billion. Russia said at that time that it would allocate \$300 million to that amount.

The U.S. government said in September that it would independently allocate \$339 million for humanitarian aid in Syria. Total U.S. funding for humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people has amounted to \$1.3 billion since the crisis began. The U.S. is also the main ICRC donor, allocating more than \$200 million to its budget last year.

While Russia's figures are clearly lower than those of the U.S., Maurer said the fact that Russia had started to provide aid was more important than the amount it was contributing.

He added that he believed Russia's humanitarian help to Syria was not politically motivated, but that over the last two years Russia had contributed to the ICRC's activity in Syria both financially and politically.

Russia has been the main backer of the Syrian government throughout the conflict, prompting frequent spats with Western governments, which mostly support the Syrian opposition. Russia strongly opposed any military intervention in Syria after chemical attacks in August that the U.S. accused the government of carrying out, while Russia accused the rebels.

Maurer said the meeting with Medvedev had allowed for an agreement on where the ICRC would need Russia's support in order to expand its activity in Syria and achieve a "broad and common" understanding on challenges of humanitarian actions in Syria, Libya and Afghanistan.

He also said the visit had provided an opportunity to establish contacts with the Russian government and explore possibilities for how the ICRC and Russia could mutually support each other in the future, though he emphasized that he would expect greater involvement by Russia in the ICRC's activities.

Maurer, who also met with Emergency Situations Minister Vladimir Puchkov on Monday and visited the Russian Red Cross office on Tuesday, said the ICRC and Russia would increase cooperation in Russia's conflict region of North Caucasus.

The ICRC has spent more than \$500 million on operations in the North Caucasus in the past 20 years with millions of people benefiting in terms of medical and food supplies, Maurer said.

"I think a lot has changed in the North Caucasus; some developments have been very positive. We feel privileged in the North Caucasus to work with the local governments, professional associations, and local Red Cross societies," he said.

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