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Syria Peace Talks Set for Jan. 22 in Geneva

By The Moscow Times

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An international peace conference aimed at ending Syria's civil war will be held Jan. 22, the first face-to-face talks between the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad and rebels seeking to overthrow him, the United Nations said Monday.

The UN is hoping for a peaceful transition in Syria, building on an agreement between world powers reached in June last year in Geneva.

"We have a clear goal," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told reporters in New York.

That was the "full implementation of the Geneva Communique of June 30 2012," including the establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, including over military and security entities.

Ban said nothing about who had been invited to the talks and took no questions from

reporters.

The participation of Syria's ally Iran in the peace conference has been a major stumbling block as Washington has opposed it, while Russia has backed Tehran's attendance.

The U.S. and European governments have said Iran could only attend the so-called "Geneva 2" talks in January if it embraces the outcome of the June 2012 conference, which called for a transitional government to replace President Bashar Assad's cabinet.

Ban's special envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, told a news conference in Geneva that Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has armed Assad's enemies, could both take part but he said the list of participants in the conference had yet to be drawn up.

The announcement of fresh talks came as Brahimi met senior U.S. and Russian officials in the Swiss city in his latest effort to get negotiations on track to end a war, now in its third year, that has killed more than 100,000 people.

Brahimi has been trying to convene a peace conference since May. He said he would meet U.S. and Russian representatives again Dec. 20 and hoped the Syrian parties could name their delegations by the end of the year.

While urging both sides to calm the conflict, Brahimi added it was not "realistic" to expect a cease-fire before the talks. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said it was not yet agreed whether Iran should be invited, Interfax news agency reported. Separately, Western diplomats agreed.

World powers including the U.S. clinched a deal on curtailing Iran's nuclear program over the weekend, in a sign of easing tensions between the long-time foes.

A senior EU diplomat involved in issues relating to Iran and Syria said that after Sunday's deal: "I cannot imagine Washington continuing to object to an Iranian presence."

Other diplomatic sources, however, said there was no assumption that Iran would come to Geneva 2 simply because a nuclear deal was achieved.

Following the announcement of talks, Britain and France made clear they were still insisting that Iran must accept the June 2012 agreement before it could be invited to Geneva 2.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said "a political transition would mean that Assad can have no future role in Syria."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov blamed the Syrian opposition for delays in convening the conference, saying it had repeatedly set out conditions for participation, including Assad's exit, which Moscow says cannot be a precondition for a peace process.

Lavrov, speaking in Rome during a trip with President Vladimir Putin, said: "It could have been held much earlier if the opposition had felt responsibility for its country and had not put forward preconditions when we met in September, October, November," state-run Russian news agency RIA reported.

A U.S. official said Secretary of State John Kerry would attend the January talks.

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