

Russia Says Syria Will Show Up to New Round of Talks

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Syrian rebels firing at government forces' airplanes in Aleppo. Activists say an attack on Sunday killed 36 people.

Russia offered assurances Tuesday that the Syrian government will show up at a new round of peace talks next week and will soon ship more toxic agents abroad for destruction under a deal to eliminate its chemical weapons arsenal.

The statements appeared intended to ease Western concerns about President Bashar Assad's commitment to a peace process that started last month, and to abandoning his chemical arsenal by mid-year under a deal brokered by Russia and the U.S.

They came as Russia hosted the leader of the Syrian opposition National Coalition for the first time in the three-year-old conflict that has killed more than 100,000 people and spawned mutual recriminations between Russia and the West.

Syria plans to send a large shipment of toxic agents out of the country this month and can complete the removal process by March 1, Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said.

"Literally yesterday the Syrians announced that the removal of a large shipment of chemical substances is planned in February. They are ready to complete this process by March 1," RIA Novosti quoted Gatilov as saying.

Moscow, Assad's most powerful diplomatic backer, has been under pressure to push Damascus to speed up shipments since it was reported last week that the Syrian government had given up less than 5 percent of its chemical stockpile.

The operation was far behind schedule and the deadline for sending all toxic agents out by this week will be missed. Russia has said Western concerns are overblown and rejected accusations that the delays are deliberate, citing security and logistical issues.

Despite sharp differences over the conflict in Syria, Russia and the U.S. have joined forces to initiate, and in September brokered the deal to eliminate its chemical arsenal after a deadly Aug. 21 poison gas attack on the outskirts of Damascus.

But the delays have sparked Western suspicion that Assad wants to use the process as a lever in the Geneva talks, which are expected to resume on Feb. 10, though the government delegation has not committed to return.

Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said Tuesday that Russia is certain the government will attend.

"We have no doubt that the government delegation will take part in the second round of international talks in Geneva," Bogdanov told reporters before talks between Lavrov and Syrian opposition leader Ahmed Jarba.

Sitting across from Lavrov at the start of their talks in the Foreign Ministry guesthouse, with security much tighter than usual, Jarba said the opposition would take part "in spite of the fact that even during the Geneva process, murders were continuing with the use of barrel bombs that were dropped on civilians."

He said that during the first round, which ended Friday, the government delegation had failed to declare that it would carry out steps laid out in an agreement reached by world powers in June 2012 in Geneva.

That was an apparent reference to the June 2012 Geneva Communique's call for the creation of an interim governing body formed by mutual consent — which the opposition says would mean excluding Assad.

The opposition hopes the Geneva talks will lead to Assad's exit from power through the creation of an interim governing body, while the government wants to focus on fighting "terrorism" and says Assad may seek reelection this year.

Lavrov, who had long been seeking to bring Jarba to Moscow for talks, said Russia is working with all sides to aid the search for a solution, and has been doing so throughout the conflict.

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