The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

UN Envoy to Be Represented at Russia's Syria Talks in January

December 31, 2014



Rebel fighters of al-Jabha al-Islamiya (the Islamic Front) warm themselves around a fire at the frontline against forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad near Nairab military airport in Aleppo, Dec. 30, 2014.

GENEVA/BEIRUT — U.N. Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura will be represented at talks about Syria in Moscow next month, his spokeswoman said on Tuesday.

Two rounds of Geneva talks early in 2014 failed to halt the conflict which has killed 200,000 people, and divisions over the future role of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remain a major stumbling block to a settlement.

In a renewed peace effort, Assad's ally Russia floated the idea in recent weeks of hosting Syrian government and opposition figures in Moscow. De Mistura's invitation confirms those talks are set for Jan. 26 to 29.

"It's a Russian initiative that focuses on intra-Syrian negotiations," his spokeswoman Juliette Touma said by email.

"The Office of the Special Envoy will be present at these talks. The Office of the Special Envoy welcomes any initiative that would push forward reaching a peaceful and diplomatic end to the crisis in Syria," she said, without specifying whether de Mistura himself would attend.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said the talks would be a "warming up" before a potential third round of Geneva talks.

De Mistura's involvement lends weight to the initiative, although — with tensions running high over the Ukraine crisis — there is no sign of Western participation.

Moscow has long supported Assad, including with arms supplies, and he became a more important ally after the Arab Spring protests toppled other Middle Eastern leaders.

A diplomat who tracks Syria said the talks could include discussions on ways to enforce Syria's security and the formation of a transitional government.

Moscow has repeated a proposal that Assad stay in power for two years with a provisional government, before presidential elections in which he could stand again along with other candidates, the diplomat said.

However, it is unclear which Syrian opposition figures would attend the talks. Two members of the National Coalition, the main Western-backed opposition, said on Tuesday that they had not received an invitation.

Coalition member Abdulahad Steifo said invitations had gone to five to 10 members personally rather than to the coalition as a body. "I think for the coalition this would be a problem," said Steifo, who did not get an invitation.

Hadi al-Bahra, head of the National Coalition, said on Saturday that Russia lacked a clear initiative.

The body will discuss its stance at its general assembly meeting which starts on Friday, Steifo said.

Syria said on Saturday it was willing to participate in "preliminary consultations" in Moscow aimed at restarting talks next year.

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