

Expectations Low After First Day of Russia-Hosted Syria Talks

April 06, 2015



Residents and rebel fighters inspect fire at a damaged site after what activists said was shelling by forces loyal to Syria's president Bashar al-Assad on Al-Dubeit neighborhood in Idlib city.

Russia hosted talks involving the Syrian government and some opposition figures on Monday, but the main opposition group stayed away and little progress was expected towards ending the Middle East country's conflict.

Delegates said they expected the four-day meeting to focus on humanitarian issues, and the aim was largely to build confidence after four years of conflict that have killed more than 220,000 people in Syria.

The Western-backed Syrian National Coalition, based in Istanbul, boycotted the meeting, saying it would take part only if the talks led to the departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an ally of Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Moscow still hoped that agreements reached at talks in Geneva in June 2012 would be implemented and suggested the absence of one

opposition group should not be overstated.

"So much blood has already been spilled in Syria and so many false starts have been made ... that we must not be guided by the fact that someone has declared one opposition group the main one and make this the basis for trying to achieve a result," Lavrov said after talks with Madagascar's foreign minister.

A document drafted at the 2012 Geneva conference and approved by Washington and Moscow called for the creation of a transitional government body formed by mutual consent.

The Syrian government delegation in Moscow was headed by Bashar Ja'afari, the country's ambassador to the United Nations, Russian news agency Interfax said.

It said the list of participants was similar to the line-up during a first round of consultations in Moscow in January, which produced no breakthrough.

More than 30 representatives of various groups attended the earlier meeting, most of them from groups that are tolerated by Assad or who agree that working with Damascus is necessary to combat the rise of Islamic State.

Russia, Assad's most prominent international backer during Syria's civil war, says fighting terrorism in Syria should be the top priority now and has called on the opposition to work with Assad to that end.

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