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U.S., Russia Agree on Partial Cease-Fire in Syria

By Anna Dolgov

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Vladimir Putin

The new Syrian deal agreed upon by Russia and the United States was deemed so momentous in Moscow that state-run Rossia-1 television network interrupted its regular programming on Monday night to broadcast a statement by President Vladimir Putin.

"I have just completed a telephone conversation with U.S. President Barack Obama," Putin said. "The phone call was initiated by the Russian side, but the interest was certainly mutual."

The deal that Putin went on to announce to his millions of Russian viewers was an agreement with the United States on a cessation of hostilities for Syria. The truce comes into effect Saturday, according to a joint statement released by the Kremlin and the U.S. State Department — provided the sides succeed in overcoming their mutual distrust and persuade their allies on the ground to accept the terms.

The agreement, which follows many months of fetid relations between Moscow and Washington, calls for setting up a hotline to "promote an effective and sustainable cessation of hostilities," exchange information and resolve potential problems, according to the joint statement.

The "cessation of hostilities" is between the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad — who enjoys Russia's backing — and opposition rebels, including groups supported by the United States and its European allies.

The terms do not extend to the Islamic State, al-Qaida affiliate Nusra Front, and other "terrorist" groups designated by the UN Security Council, according to the statement. Part of the difficulty, however, is the tendency by the Assad regime and its Moscow allies to denounce all Syrian political opposition rebels as terrorists.

"Signal of Hope"

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the deal Monday as a demonstration that the International Syria Support Group — co-chaired by the United States and Russia — is committed "to exert influence on the warring parties to bring about an immediate reduction in violence as a first step towards a more durable ceasefire."

"Above all, it is a long-awaited signal of hope to the Syrian people that after five years of conflict there may be an end to their suffering in sight," Ban Ki-moon's office said in a written statement to The Moscow Times.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who has been in talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on a deal for Syria in recent days, praised the agreement as a "moment of promise" — but one whose fulfillment "depends on actions."

"If implemented and adhered to, this cessation will not only lead to a decline in violence but also continue to expand the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian supplies to besieged areas and support a political transition to a government that is responsive to the desires of the Syrian people," Kerry said in a statement published Monday.

Putin said in his televised address that "joint actions, which have been agreed upon with the Americans, have the potential for radically turning around the crisis situation in Syria."

"A real chance has finally appeared to put an end to many years of bloodshed and violence," Putin said.

Syrian "Conditional Commitment"

Syria's main opposition group, the Saudi-backed High Negotiations Committee (HNC), said it accepted the cease-fire deal, but stressed that its "commitment to the truce is conditional," The Associated Foreign Press reported Monday.

The group's chief Riad Hijab, a former Syrian prime minister, said he had low expectations of the ability of the Assad regime and its allies — mainly Russia and Iran — to "commit to stopping their hostile acts," according to the HNC statement quoted by AFP.

The “conditions” set by Hijab's group include the release of prisoners, delivery of humanitarian aid, and an end to sieges and the bombardment of civilians, the statement was quoted as saying.

The demands follow months of accusations by Syrian opposition groups and Western governments that Russian air strikes in Syria, which began Sept. 30, 2015, are targeting civilians and Assad's political opponents.

The demands also come on the heels of an accusation by Amnesty International's crisis response director Tirana Hassan, who charged that Russia has committed some of the most “egregious” war crimes seen in decades by allegedly targeting civilians in Syria and attacking the aid workers trying to help them, according to remarks aired by Sky News on Sunday.

Moscow has previously rejected the accusations, maintaining that its air strikes are aimed against “terrorists.”

Hours after Moscow and Washington announced the deal, Assad's office issued a statement saying the Syrian president had set parliamentary elections for April 13, according to media reports out of Syria.

While a parliamentary election is part of a UN plan for resolving the crisis, holding one this spring follows Syria's election cycle — balloting was previously held in May 2012, with elected parliament members serving four-year terms.

“Difficult to Implement”

Along with welcoming remarks for the cease-fire deal from Moscow, Washington and the UN, the White House warned the deal “is going to be difficult to implement,” according to spokesman Josh Earnest.

“We know that there are a lot of obstacles and there are sure to be some setbacks,” Earnest said Monday. “After all, for years, we have been trying to reach a diplomatic resolution to the many problems that plague that nation that has broken apart.”

Russian air strikes in Syria have continued since a tentative Russian-U.S. plan on a cessation of hostilities was reached earlier this month, even as Kerry and Lavrov continued their diplomatic efforts.

Putin used his television address to cast his country as a leading international player, joining forces with the United States to fight terrorism. He reiterated his argument that attempts to resolve global crises should be approved by the UN — where Moscow is a veto-wielding permanent member of the Security Council.

“The main thing is that conditions are being created to launch a true political process though a broad inter-Syrian dialog in Geneva under the aegis of the UN,” Putin said. “Against this background, Russian-American agreements on a cease-fire for Syria, their joint fulfillment in coordination with all member states of the International Syria Support Group can serve as an example of responsible actions, based on international law and UN principles, by the international community against the threat of terrorism.”

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