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Russia and UN play down report of four-way Syria talks



Moscow and the United Nations played down reports that Syria's opposition leader would hold a joint meeting with the UN, Syria envoy and officials from the United States and Russia at a security conference in Munich on Saturday.

Syrian opposition sources said on Friday that Syrian National Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib would meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi at a security conference in the German city.

But a UN official and a senior Russian diplomat said there were no plans for them all to meet together.

"The UN special envoy is not involved in any trilateral meetings," a United Nations official said in Munich, adding that Brahimi planned separate meetings with Biden, al-Khatib and Lavrov.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said Lavrov was not scheduled to take part in expanded talks.

"Media reports of a meeting in Munich in the format of Lavrov-Biden-Brahimi and Syrian opposition representative al-Khatib do not correspond with reality," he said. A Russian diplomatic source later said such a meeting could still come about "spontaneously", and that he did not rule it out.

Lavrov has yet to meet al-Khatib, who in December rejected a Russian invitation to come to Moscow for talks and urged Lavrov to apologize for what he said was Russian intervention in Syria and support for President Bashar al-Assad.

Al-Khatib survived a challenge to his authority after saying he would be willing to talk to Syrian officials without President Bashar al-Assad stepping down first.

Russia, Syria's main arms supplier, has blocked three UN Security Council resolutions aimed at putting pressure on Assad. It says his exit from power must not be a precondition for a negotiated settlement of the 22-month-old conflict, which has killed more than 60,000 people.