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'Two-year conflict leading to mutual destruction,' Russia warns Syria



Russia on Wednesday urged the regime and rebels in Syria to swiftly halt their almost two-year conflict, warning that seeking a military settlement risked leading to mutual destruction. "It's time to end this two-year conflict," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after a meeting with Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi and other top Arab diplomats. "Neither side can allow itself to bet on a military settlement as this is a path to nowhere, a path to mutual destruction," he said. Lavrov, who on Monday is due to host Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem for crucial talks, said Moscow was working to encourage dialogue between the rebels and regime of President Bashar al-Assad. "There are signs of positive tendencies, signs of tendencies for dialogue both from the side of the government and the opposition," he said. But he said it was up to the two sides to decide what kind of dialogue might take place and at what level. "It is important that they do not come out with any conditions for each other and say that I am going to talk to this person but not that one." Moscow, unlike other world powers, still keeps close ties with the regime of Assad and has infuriated the West and some Arab states by refusing to halt military cooperation with Damascus. Lavrov confirmed that Russia was working on agreeing a trip to Moscow by the head of the Syrian opposition National Coalition Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib who has previously been unwilling to visit Russia over its past support for the regime. "We are agreeing a date of a visit here by Mr Khatib, which will probably happen at the start of March," said Lavrov. He said the diplomacy was aimed at "creating the conditions for the start of direct dialogue" between the regime and opposition. "What is needed is that the sides sit at the negotiating table," said Lavrov. He said there were signs of a new readiness on the part of the Syrian opposition for dialogue and it was vital that this was met by similar moves on the part the Syrian government. "The government has long talked about this but now has come the time when words have to be put into concrete deeds," said Lavrov. "We count on this happening and we will work to make sure it does happen." Lavrov was speaking after a meeting of the formal session of the so-called Russian-Arab Forum that was founded in December 2009 but failed to meet as tensions rose between Moscow and regional states over the Arab Spring uprisings. As well as Arabi, the talks included the foreign ministers of Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon and Egypt. However the top diplomats of Qatar and Saudi Arabia -- who have been strongly supportive of the Syrian opposition and critical of Moscow -- were conspicuously absent. Russia on Tuesday sent two planes to Syria to pick up Russians wanting to leave the conflict-torn country as the navy despatched four warships to the Mediterranean reportedly for a

Two emergencies ministry planes carrying humanitarian aid for Syria took off from Moscow for the port city of Latakia and would take any Russians wanting to leave on their flight back, the ministry said.

The Russian emergencies ministry Ilyushin-62 and Ilyushin-76 planes were carrying over 40 tonnes of humanitarian aid and would be ready to evacuate any Russians wanting to leave the country, a ministry statement said. The aid consists of electrical equipment, bedding, tents as well as foodstuffs like fish and milk conserves as well as sugar.

On Tuesday, U.N. humanitarian chief Valerie Amos warned that aid operations are largely unable to reach the opposition-held north of Syria, despite the U.N. saying it has stepped up its operations elsewhere in the country.

"We are watching a humanitarian tragedy unfold before our eyes," Amos told a news briefing late Tuesday. "We must do all we can to reassure the people that we care and that we will not let them down."

"Cross-line operations are difficult but they are do-able.

"We are crossing conflict lines, negotiating with armed groups on the ground to reach more in need. But we are not reaching enough of those who require our help. Limited access in the north is a problem that can only be solved using alternative methods of aid delivery," Amos said, quoted by Reuters news agency.

Some 70,000 people have been killed in the nearly two-year-old revolt against President Bashar al-Assad that has also sent 860,000 refugees fleeing abroad, according to the world body.

In the last few weeks, the U.N. refugee agency reached the northern opposition-held Azaz with aid for the first time. The World Health Organization has delivered vaccines in many opposition-held areas, Amos said.

Syrian opposition representatives told the United Nations this week that some three million people living throughout rebel-held territory require international assistance, she said.

The Syrian government still refuses to allow U.N. convoys to cross from Turkey into northern Syria, as most border crossings are controlled by the Free Syrian Army, she said.