

Syria sends stern warning, says foreign troops entering country will return 'in coffins'

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Damascus: In a strongly worded warning directed at Saudi Arabia or other foreign troops entering the country, Syria's foreign minister said Saturday that they would "return home in wooden coffins". The minister further asserted that recent military advances had put his government "on track" to end the five-year-old civil war.

Walid al-Moallem's comments capped a week that saw the collapse of the latest U.N-led Syria peace efforts and a Russian-backed Syrian government offensive near the city of Aleppo that sent thousands of residents fleeing toward Turkey.

A Turkish official said Saturday that as many as 35,000 Syrians had massed along the closed border.

Suleyman Tapsiz, governor of the border province of Kilis, said Turkey would send aid to the displaced, but had no immediate plans to let them in. He said Turkey was prepared to open the gates in the event of an "extraordinary crisis."

The Norwegian Refugee Council said thousands of Syrians have arrived at seven of the main informal camps close to the Turkish border. The group said the camps were already at capacity before the latest influx, and that aid groups are working around the clock to deliver tents and essential items to the displaced.

In Amsterdam, EU foreign ministers held informal talks Saturday with their Turkish counterpart.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini urged Turkey to open its borders to the Syrians and said the EU is providing aid to Ankara exactly for such purposes. She said the displaced are "Syrians in need for international protection," and that this was the message delivered in the meeting.

Some of the refugees found shelter in Afrin, a Kurdish enclave to Aleppo's north controlled by a militia known as the YPG, said a Kurdish official, Idris Naasan. The militia hoped to prevent a humanitarian disaster and help those stuck at the border, he said.

The week had begun on a somewhat hopeful note, with U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura declaring the launch of indirect talks between a Syrian government delegation and opposition representatives in Geneva.

However, he was forced to adjourn by mid-week, after the opposition said there was no point negotiating while pro-government troops backed by Russian airstrikes escalated attacks and gained ground north of Aleppo, once Syria's largest city. The offensive appeared aimed at encircling strongholds rebels have held in the city since 2012.

The breakdown of the talks was followed by a warning from opposition backer Saudi Arabia that it is ready, in principle, to send ground troops to Syria, albeit in the context of the U.S.-led military campaign against Islamic State extremists who control large areas of Syria and Iraq.

Russia's Defense Ministry meanwhile said it had "reasonable grounds" to suspect that Turkey, another opposition ally, is making intensive preparations for a military invasion of Syria.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, speaking during a visit to Senegal on Friday, dismissed the Russian claim as "laughable" and blamed Moscow for the deaths of civilians in Syria.

In his news conference Saturday, al-Moallem signaled a newfound confidence on the part of the Syrian government, boosted by growing Russian military support. This week alone, Russian warplanes hit close to 900 targets across Syria, including near Aleppo.

The foreign minister said recent territorial gains signal that the war is nearing its end.

"I can say, from the achievements for our armed forces ... that we are now on track to end the conflict," he said. "Like it or not, our battlefield achievements indicate that we are headed toward the end of the crisis."

He called on rebel fighters to "come to their senses" and lay down their weapons.

Asked about the possibility of Saudi ground troops entering Syria, he said logic would suggest this is unlikely, but that "with the crazy Saudi leadership nothing is far-fetched."

"Any ground intervention in Syria, without the consent of the Syrian government, will be considered an aggression that should be resisted by every Syrian citizen," he said. "I regret to say that they will return home in wooden coffins."

He repeated the line three times during the one-hour press conference, saying it applies to anyone who attacks Syria with ground troops.

Iran, another military ally of Syria, ridiculed Saudi Arabia.

The semi-official Fars news agency quoted Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, as saying he didn't think the Saudis were "brave enough" to send ground troops.

"They talk big," Jafari said. "But even if it happens, it won't be bad because they would be definitely defeated."

Iran on Saturday held funerals for six soldiers, including a senior Guard commander, Gen. Mohsen Ghajarian, who were killed in northern Syria while fighting alongside government troops.

Iran has said it has dispatched military advisers to Syria, but denies sending combat troops. A number of Iranians have been killed in recent months, including several high-ranking commanders.

The Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, an ally of Iran and Syria, has also sent reinforcements to Syria.

The Syrian state news agency SANA reported Saturday that a member of Hezbollah's "war media" department, which films military battles for the group, was among those killed in fighting north of Aleppo.

The U.N. envoy, de Mistura, has said the Geneva talks should resume by Feb. 25, though it's unclear if the delegations will return.

The opposition has accused the government of acting in bad faith by launching the Aleppo offensive in parallel to the start of the talks.

Al-Moallem said the Saudi-backed opposition never intended to negotiate seriously. "They did not come to have dialogue, they did not have such orders," he said.

The main Syrian opposition group, the Syrian National Coalition, accused Russia of crimes against humanity because of the mass displacement of civilians from Aleppo. In a statement Saturday, the group called on the U.N. Security

Council to denounce the Russian actions.

- (With AP inputs)