

## **Syria crisis: US-Russia discuss peace process, Bashar al-Assad says ready for ceasefire**

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**Moscow/Damascus:** US and Russia have launched talks on brokering a ceasefire in trouble-hit Syria after failing to make Friday's scheduled deadline for a pause in fighting. Yesterday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry discussed the issues to try to find a way for a long-term cessation of hostilities that would help efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to besieged areas.

The two, over a phone call, discussed humanitarian aid issues and the planned cessation of hostilities in Syria, "with the exception of fighting against terrorist groups". It was noted that progress was made on humanitarian aid delivery to besieged areas in Syria.

Lavrov and Kerry also discussed current practical interaction between the two countries, both being co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group.

"It was confirmed that the establishment of mechanisms to implement tasks (in the Munich agreement reached last Friday) requires military coordination," Russian Foreign Ministry statement said.

Lavrov also stressed the importance of not allowing Turkey to violate Syria's territorial integrity, as Ankara continued "inadmissible and provocative" bombings against Syrian territories.

### **Ready for ceasefire, says Syrian President**

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has said that he was ready for ceasefire in Syria on condition that the 'terrorists' don't exploit it. In an interview with the Spanish newspaper, Assad said halting the military operations in Syria demands deterring the terrorists from exploiting it to enhance their positions.

He pointed out that countries, like Turkey, must stop sending more terrorists and arms as well as providing logistical support to the terrorists. "Of course... we have declared that we are ready (to respect a cessation of military operations) but the matter is not only about declaring it because the another party may declare the same thing. It's about what will be done on ground," he said.

"The matter is primarily related to a cessation of fire but there are other complementary, and more important factors, such as preventing the terrorists from exploiting the cessation of the military operations to enhance their positions... it's also related to preventing countries like Turkey from sending terrorists and arms into Syria," the President continued.

The remark comes at times Russia and the US were pushing to achieve a cessation of hostilities in Syria.

### **Russia asks NATO nations to choose targets carefully**

In another development, Russia has urged the US and other NATO countries to responsibly and carefully choose their targets in Syria. The comment came as the Serbian Foreign Ministry earlier confirmed two employees of the Serbian

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embassy, kidnapped last November in Libya, were killed in the US airstrikes against terror outfit Islamic State.

"This is far from the first time NATO airstrikes have killed innocent people," the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement, expressing deep condolences to the families of the victims.

"Of course, the US and its allies should be guided first and foremost by international law and act not unilaterally, with coordinated steps with all concerned parties in the international community."

The US-led coalition have been conducting airstrikes against terrorist targets in Syria and other Middle East countries since 2014, while Russia started bombing terrorist targets in Syria from last September.

Russia has fallen into "war of words" with western countries on Syrian issues, accusing each other of causing civilian casualties and bombing targets other than terrorists'.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday claimed that Russian armed forces in Syria "helped Syrian government army and other participants in anti-terror efforts to defeat terrorists, saved civilians from violence, barbarism and tyranny".

"We have always sought to resolve any disputed issues solely through political and diplomatic means, we have repeatedly contributed to stabilizing the situation in different countries, helped resolve serious conflicts," Putin said.

Reiterating that fighting terrorists in Syria is protecting Russia's national interests, Putin said the Russian army must "always be ready to promptly and efficiently respond to any potential threat, to stop any provocation and aggressive actions".

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