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Syria Cease-fire Deal Greeted With Support, Skepticism

By *Voice of America*

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Steve Herman, Voice of America

Turkey and a key Syrian opposition group pledged on Saturday to support a complicated and partly-secret cease-fire deal agreed upon by the United States and Russia.

Under its terms, a nationwide truce in Syria is set to begin at sundown on Monday to allow wider humanitarian aid access.

The foreign ministry of Turkey, which sent its military into Syria late last month, announced support for the truce and the agreement announced in Geneva early Saturday as a prelude to a long-term political solution to end five years of war.

Syrian opposition forces are welcoming the deal while expressing skepticism a cease-fire can hold, noting Russia and the Syrian military did not adhere to a previous agreement.

Moscow's influence on Damascus "is the only way to get the regime to comply," said a statement issued by Bassma Kodmani of the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Opposition.

News of the Geneva accord brought no immediate relief to Aleppo, where the army continued its attack on rebel-held territory, apparently hoping to maximize its gains before the cease-fire deadline.

If there is "reduced violence" for seven consecutive days in the country and sufficient humanitarian aid is allowed into Aleppo "the two main events of this agreement start to take effect," said a senior State Department official.

The official, noting that analysis and criticism of the conditions was quickly "going a little bit sideways" on social media, emphasized "you're not going to see calm in Syria anytime soon." The official said the deal calls for a week of "reduced violence" starting from sunset on September 12, the beginning of the Muslim Eid holiday. If that occurs, then the U.S. and Russia would begin coordinating airstrikes against the jihadist Nusra Front, as well as the so-called Islamic State group. After those initial strikes get underway, the agreement calls for the Syrian air force to then cease its attacks.

The deal, made after weeks of shuttle diplomacy, was announced at a joint news conference in Geneva by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Changing 'the Nature of the Conflict'

Syrian government "air attacks have been the main driver of civilian casualties and migration flows and

the most frequent violations of the hostilities," said Kerry. "Halting all of the regime's military air activities in key areas - key areas that are defined - should put an end to barrel bombs and indiscriminate bombing of civilian neighborhoods."

Kerry said this would "change the nature of the conflict."

Lavrov told reporters that Moscow had informed the Syrian government about the arrangements "and it is ready to fulfill them."

The United Nations' Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura briefly joined Kerry and Lavrov on the podium in Geneva to welcome the U.S.-Russian agreement, saying it creates a "real window of opportunity which all relevant actors in the region and beyond should seize to put the crisis in Syria on a different path and reduce the violence and suffering of the Syrian people."

Lavrov noted there are those who would like to undermine the agreement thus "no one can give a 100 percent guarantee."

Russia wants to see Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, stay in power, while moderate opposition forces and Turkey insist no transition deal can allow him to retain power for any period of time.

The United States has also long held that the Syrian leader cannot lead any future government, due to the brutal repression of his opponents.

If the just-announced plans hold, Kerry said, it could lead to political transition and reverse the current trend of "simply creating more terrorists, more extremists and destroying the country in the process."

The Obama administration has repeatedly stated there is no military solution to the prolonged Syrian crisis, which has killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians and displaced 12 million people from their homes, according to U.N. estimates.

Opposition to the Assad family's four decades of rule over Syria broke into the open in early 2011, and the situation soon deteriorated into a complex civil war which continues to rage.

"Out of all this complexity is emerging now a simple choice between war and peace, between human agony and humanitarian relief, between the continued disintegration of an ancient society and the rebirth of a united and modern nation," Kerry told reporters before flying back home.

He and other stakeholders will be anxiously watching starting Monday to see if the various client forces of questionable allegiance and discipline pitted against each other will indeed stop fighting.

About the Author



Voice of America

Voice of America (VOA) is the official external broadcast institution of the United States federal government. VOA provides programming for broadcast on radio, TV, and the Internet outside of the U.S., in English and some foreign languages.

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