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## **RUSSIA SEEKS BACKING FOR NEW TALKS ON SYRIA**

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Russia is drumming up diplomatic support for talks in Kazakhstan next month aimed at ending the fighting in Syria, a plan that would give Moscow a greater voice in efforts to broker a settlement of the nearly six-year-old conflict.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke by phone Wednesday with Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations special envoy for Syria, and exchanged views about a possible Syria agreement, the foreign affairs ministry said in Moscow.

Mr. de Mistura expressed support for a plan announced last week by the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey to hold talks between members of the Syrian government and some opposition groups in the Kazakh capital, Astana, the ministry said. Groups such as Islamic State and the group previously known as Nusra Front would be excluded.

Top officials from Ankara, Tehran and Moscow met last week in the Russian capital to discuss the Kazakhstan talks, which wouldnt include the U.S.

The U.S. has participated in the U.N.-backed process in Geneva to end the Syrian conflict. Following last weeks meeting in Moscow, Mr. Lavrov played down that diplomatic initiative, saying, I believe that the most effective format is the one that you see today.

A U.S. official said the Obama administration wasnt opposed to the talks being held in Kazakhstan, even if American diplomats werent directly involved. The State Departments only condition, the official said, is that the negotiations are consistent with resolutions approved by the United Nations on Syria.

The United States looks forward to the resumption of talks between the regime and opposition groups as soon as possible, said the official. We will continue working with our multilateral partners towards a viable nationwide cease-fire and the delivery of humanitarian assistance for all who need it within the country.

In Geneva last week, Mr. de Mistura voiced support for the Astana discussions. There are moments when having regional players who are heavily involved like Turkey, Russian Federation and Iran, talk to each other is a good thing, the U.N. envoy said. At the same time, he noted the enormous impact, influence and support lent by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry this year to peace efforts in Syria.

Syrian rebel groups said Wednesday they had received no details of a cease-fire proposal sponsored by Turkey and Russia. Neither the Turkish government nor the Russian government

commented Wednesday on the plan, reported by Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency.

The revolutionary rebel factions didn't receive any official Syria cease-fire proposal. Therefore, news that a cease-fire agreement has been reached is untrue, Labib al-Nahhas, foreign affairs representative for the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham rebel faction, said on his Twitter account. Ahrar al-Sham, which has strong ties to Ankara, is one of the largest armed groups in Syria.

Other rebel leaders said they couldn't approve a cease-fire until they were briefed on its terms, including which groups and what areas of Syria would be included in the deal.

Reports about a Russian-Turkish agreement came a few days after tens of thousands of civilians and rebels were evacuated from the northern Syrian city of Aleppo.

On Dec. 22, Aleppo returned to full Syrian government control for the first time since 2012, after rebels and civilians who wanted to leave the city were transferred to the rebel-controlled countryside west of the city and to neighboring Idlib province. Some 35,000 people were evacuated to the countryside, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Government warplanes have been carrying out airstrikes on the two areas where the evacuees were moved, said the U.K.-based opposition monitoring group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

A pro-regime website said Russian warplanes resumed bombing raids on Tuesday against the rebel-held countryside west of Aleppo.

The Observatory also reported airstrikes Wednesday on Idlib province, which is mostly rebel-held.

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