
AT SYRIA TALKS IN KAZAKHSTAN, A PLEDGE TO SAFEGUARD TRUCE

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25.01.2017

Los Angeles Times, 24 Jan 2017

Russia, Iran and Turkey □ sponsors of talks in Kazakhstan between the Syrian government and rebel factions □ pledged Tuesday to consolidate the country's nearly month-old cease-fire and set up a three-way mechanism to ensure compliance of all sides.

At the conclusion of the two-day Astana conference on Syria's nearly six-year war, the three countries said they will use their "influence" to strengthen the truce, without specifying how that would work.

The statement signed by the three sponsors also said the agreement paves the way for political talks to be held in Geneva on Feb. 8, and welcomed the rebel groups' participation in the U.N.-sponsored talks.

Russia, an ally of the Syrian government of President Bashar Assad, and Turkey, a supporter of the opposition, had negotiated the shaky Dec. 30 cease-fire. Iran, a supporter of the government, had approved it. The cease-fire greatly reduced the violence in Syria, but violations continued and the Syrian opposition and the government and its allies exchanged blame.

Kazakhstan's foreign minister, Kairat Abdrakhmanov, read out the final statement at the end of the conference, which briefly brought the warring parties together in a face-to-face meeting. But the talks were largely indirect, mediated by the United Nations envoy.

The meeting's final statement said the three countries "will seek through concrete steps and using the influence of the parties the consolidation the cease-fire." They also agreed "to establish a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the cease-fire, prevent any provocations and determine all modalities of the cease-fire."

The statement said the three nations will continue their joint efforts in fighting the extremist Islamic State group and the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria. They called on rebel forces to separate themselves from the Al Qaeda affiliate, a sticky point that has previously been the reason for the failure of previous cease-fires. The rebel groups have formed close links with the group, known as the Front for the Conquest of Syria (formerly the Nusra Front) on the ground. Tough fighters, the Front for the Conquest of Syria is excluded from the cease-fire, according to the government. However, the rebels say the truce should include all of Syria.

The Astana gathering featured a brief face-to-face meeting between Syrian government and rebel representatives – their first since the war began in 2011 – that was quickly followed by harsh exchanges.

After the final statement and in a briefing with journalists, the Syrian government delegate to the talks said the conference succeeded in consolidating the cease-fire in the war-ravaged country.

Bashar Jaafari, Syria's U.N. ambassador who is leading the government delegation in the talks in Astana, said his government did all it could to "remove obstacles" facing the talks in Astana.

Shortly before him, an opposition representative, Osama Abo Zayd, said the rebels had reservations about the final statement because Iran, which fights alongside the government, should not be considered a sponsor of the talks, but a party to the conflict.

Kaynak/Source: