

Rocky Syria talks in Russia end, ignore key opposition demands

Author:

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SOCHI, Russia: A Syrian peace conference in Russia ended on Tuesday with a statement calling for democratic elections, but ignoring key opposition demands after a day marred by squabbles and heckling of the Russian foreign minister.

The participants also agreed to set up a committee to rewrite the Syrian constitution at the conference, which much of the opposition said aimed to serve the interests of President Bashar Assad and his close ally, Moscow. A final statement said Syrians must decide their future through elections, but did not say whether Syrian refugees would be allowed to take part, something sought by Assad's opponents and Western states. Syrians had the "exclusive right" to pick their political system free of foreign intervention, it added.

It also urged the preservation of security forces without calling for their reform, another demand of the opposition.

"This conference is tailor-made for Assad and his terrorist regime," said Mustafa Sejari, a senior official in a Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel group that operates in northern Syria. "The Sochi statement does not concern us and is not even a subject of discussion."

Russia hosted what it called a Syrian Congress of National Dialogue in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. After helping turn the tide of the war in Syria in Assad's favor, Moscow has cast itself as a Middle East peace broker.

The event was boycotted, however, by the leadership of the Syrian opposition, while powers such as the United States, Britain and France stayed away because of what they said was the Syrian government's refusal to properly engage.

Western countries support a separate United Nations-mediated peace process, which has so far failed to yield progress toward ending a war that is entering its eighth year. The latest round of those talks took place last week in Vienna.

"We don't need a new process, we don't need any competitive process," UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, who attended the Sochi conference, told reporters in New York by phone on Monday.

He said the constitutional committee agreed in Sochi "will become a reality in Geneva," where most of the UN-led Syria peace talks have been held. De Mistura also said he would decide the criteria for committee members and select about 50 people – from government, opposition and independent groups. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov helped open the Sochi conference on Tuesday by reading out a statement from President Vladimir Putin saying the conditions were ripe for Syria to turn "a tragic page" in its history. But some delegates stood up and began heckling him, accusing Moscow of

killing civilians in Syria with its air strikes.

The incident was broadcast on Russian state TV where two security guards were shown approaching one man in the audience indicating that he should sit down. Other delegates shouted out their support for Russia.

FLAG ROW

In a further setback, one group of delegates, which included members of the armed opposition who had flown in from Turkey, refused to leave Sochi airport until Syrian government flags and emblems – which they said were offensive – had been removed.

Ahmed Tomah, the head of the delegation, said his group had boycotted the congress and would fly back to Turkey because of the flag row and what he called broken promises to end the bombardment of civilians.

“We were surprised that none of the promises that were given had been kept, the ferocious bombing of civilians had not stopped. Nor were the flags and banners of the regime removed,” he said in a video recorded at the airport.

Artyom Kozhin, a senior diplomat at the Russian Foreign Ministry, acknowledged there had been some complications.

“Some problems have arisen with a group of the armed opposition that has come from Turkey which has made its participation dependent on additional demands,” he wrote on social media.

Lavrov had spoken by phone twice to his Turkish counterpart and been told that the problem would be resolved, said Kozhin.

Turkish and Iranian government delegations also attended the congress.

Vitaly Naumkin, a Russian expert on the Middle East who serves as an adviser to de Mistura, told reporters the problems encountered by organizers had not tarnished the event.

“Nothing awful happened,” said Naumkin. “Nobody is fighting anyone else. Nobody is killing anyone. These were standard working moments.”



Main category:

Suspected Russian warplanes hit busy market in Idlib, kill 15

Author:

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AMMAN: At least 15 people were killed on Tuesday when suspected Russian warplanes struck a crowded market in the rebel-held city of Ariha in the second such strike on a shopping area in opposition-held Idlib within 24 hours, residents and rescuers said.

They said the aircraft were flying at high altitude, which differentiates it from aging Syrian airforce.

The opposition-run Civil Defense service said a further 20 people were wounded in the strike. Video released by local activists showed extensive damage, with produce mixed up with human parts.

Reuters could not verify the authenticity of the footage

A resident said the attack took place at the busiest time of the day.

Russia's defense ministry regularly says it is attacking hard-line Islamist militants. It denies opposition and witness accounts that its warplanes target market places, medical centers and residential areas away from frontlines.

Syrian media made no mention of the strikes.

Civil Defense workers and residents said dozens of raids have since Sunday struck the towns of Khan Sheikhoun, Maarat al Numan, Saraqeb and scores of villages.

On Monday, warplanes bombed a potato market in nearby Saraqeb, killing at least 11 people, mostly farmers and traders. Shortly after that warplanes knocked out of action the only public hospital in the city, which was supported by French charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF).

MSF said in a statement the attack on the hospital killed at least five people, including a child, and injured six. It said this was the second strike on the hospital in just over a week.

Russia has escalated its strikes in Idlib in recent months, throwing its military weight behind a Syrian military campaign to push deeper into the mainly rebel-held northwestern province. (Reporting by Suleiman Al-Khalidi)



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

[Palestinian, Israeli ministers meet after US Jerusalem move](#)

Author:

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JERUSALEM: Senior Palestinian and Israeli officials met at a ceremony Tuesday in the first high-level encounter since US President Donald Trump's controversial recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Palestinian economy minister Abeer Odeh and Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon attended the inauguration of a new cargo scanner at the Israeli-controlled Allenby Bridge border crossing between Jordan and the West Bank. The new device will enable 200 containers to cross between Jordan and the Palestinian territory a day instead of the current 100, Israel's tax authority said in a statement.

Other senior Israeli and Palestinian officials were at the event, as well as a Jordanian representative and Dutch diplomats, whose country donated the new machine.

"I reached the finance ministry after a long period of stagnation in the relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority," Kahlon said in

remarks relayed by the tax authority. "We've decided to take responsibility and advance a number of joint projects."

"We have many plans to continue our financial cooperation with the (Palestinian) Authority," Kahlon said at the ceremony.

Kahlon noted that he will be meeting with Palestinian prime minister Rami Hamdallah in Jerusalem on Sunday as part of their efforts to advance "a number of joint projects."

Hamdallah and Kahlon meet regularly to discuss economic and infrastructure issues. Their last talks took place on October 30.

Their Sunday meeting will be the first since Trump pledged on December 6 to move the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, breaking with the policies of his predecessors.

Outraged Palestinian leaders said the US could no longer play the role of peace broker and called for the suspension of their recognition of Israel, a move that has not been implemented.

The United States meanwhile withheld \$65 million of funds earmarked for the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA.

Palestinian officials did not confirm the Israeli report on the meeting.

Hamdallah is heading for Brussels for an "emergency" meeting Wednesday of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, which coordinates international donor support for the Palestinians.

The Palestinian premier will raise the issue of the financial crisis facing his government and seek funding for Gaza, a government statement said.



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