

Lavrov Says Patience Needed in Syria

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VILNIUS, Lithuania — An Arab League peace plan for Syria needs time to work in the same way that a similar program for Yemen eventually bore fruit, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Wednesday, offering to send Russian observers to Syria if necessary.

The bloc has threatened sanctions against Syria but has repeatedly extended deadlines for Damascus to agree to a peace plan that would see Arab monitors oversee the withdrawal of troops from towns, and usher in talks between the government and opposition forces.

"A few months were spent by all external players to convince the warring parties [in Yemen] to agree and sign a corresponding peace plan," Lavrov told reporters after attending a meeting in Lithuania of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

"The same kind of patience, the same kind of responsibility need to be exercised in relation to the realization of the plan of the Arab League in Syria," he added.

In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh has finally signed a Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered agreement to step down after 10 months of massive popular protests, having several times agreed to sign only to pull out.

However, renewed fighting has erupted, with pro-government forces and tribesmen opposed to Saleh trading artillery fire on the streets of the capital Sanaa on Wednesday.

Lavrov said Russia did not want the Arab League initiative to become an ultimatum or an excuse for outside interference.

On the other hand, the observers to be sent to Syria could include non-Arabs, if it suited Damascus, he said. "Russia, in particular, could delegate its own representatives to such a group, if the Syrian authorities were interested," he said.

In October, Russia and China vetoed a Western-backed UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria's crackdown on peaceful protests.

Russia said the resolution could have opened the door to Western military intervention of the kind seen in Libya, where it says NATO overstepped its Security Council mandate.

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