

Lavrov to Attend Syria Meeting, If It Happens

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UNITED NATIONS — Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will attend a meeting on the escalating conflict in Syria that international mediator Kofi Annan is attempting to organize in Geneva this weekend, Russia's UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, said Tuesday.

"Sergei Lavrov has officially accepted the invitation to come to the actual meeting in Geneva on Saturday, June 30," Churkin told reporters ahead of a closed-door meeting of the UN Security Council on Syria. "We attach great importance to this meeting."

Annan's deputy, Nasser al-Kidwa, was briefing the 15-nation council by video-link on Annan's attempts to prevent the total collapse of his moribund six-point peace plan.

Diplomats said it was not entirely clear that the meeting of the five permanent Security Council members and key regional players scheduled for Saturday would take place. Annan has said that Iran should attend, but diplomats say the United States, Saudi Arabia and others dislike that idea.

Several Western diplomats said there was no agreement on what the value of the meeting would be. But Churkin made clear that Moscow expected the Saturday meeting to go ahead.

"I hope other planned participants are going to be there as well," Churkin said. "We hope it can provide powerful impetus for political efforts to put an end to the conflict."

So far, Annan's attempts to get the opposition and government to begin a dialogue aimed at ending the 16-month conflict have failed. Annan has said that a "contact group" of the permanent council members and regional players could pressure the Syrian government and opposition to begin political negotiations.

One diplomat inside the council chamber said in an interview that Kidwa said "it's essential states with influence agree themselves on principles and guidelines to support a Syrian-led political transition."

He added that Kidwa said an "agreement on principles and scope of participation" — possibly a reference to whether Iran should take part — would be needed before the June 30 meeting could go ahead.

So far, envoys said, there is no such agreement among the five permanent Security Council members — the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China.

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