

Kofi Annan proposes Syria 'unity government'

By Al Jazeera

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Kofi Annan, the joint United Nations-Arab League envoy to Syria, has proposed setting up a transitional government that could include followers of President Bashar al-Assad and opposition members in a bid to end the country's war, diplomats said.

The major powers - the US, Britain, France, China and Russia, a key Assad ally - generally back the plan, which will be discussed at a meeting of foreign ministers Annan has convened in Geneva on Saturday, they said.

Annan's blueprint says the interim government could include members of Assad's government and opposition groups, but not officials "whose presence could harm the transition and jeopardize the credibility of the government or undermine efforts to bring reconciliation," according to a summary given by one UN diplomat on Wednesday.

"The language of Annan's plan suggests that Assad could be excluded but also that certain opposition figures could be ruled out," said a second UN diplomat, though he went on to note that the plan did not explicitly exclude the Syrian president.

The vague language about Assad meant immediate skepticism from some members of Syria's opposition, who said they would not accept a transition plan unless it required the president to step down.

"The proposal is still murky to us, but I can tell you that if it does not clearly state that Assad must step down, it will be unacceptable to us," said Samir Nashar, an executive member of the opposition bloc the Syrian National Council.

The plan is contained in a set of "Guidelines and Principles of a Syrian-led Transition" that Annan sent out to ministers who will be at Saturday's meeting, diplomats said.

The Geneva meeting will be attended by foreign ministers from the major powers -- all permanent members of the UN Security Council -- along with Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq.

National dialogue

Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said on Thursday that the fate of Assad should be decided through a national dialogue, rejecting any solution imposed from abroad to end the violence in the country.

"The meeting in Geneva was intended to support Kofi Annan's plan and it must set the conditions for the end of violence and the start of an all-Syrian national dialogue, and not predetermine the contents of this dialogue," Lavrov told a briefing.

Lavrov also said it was a mistake not to include Iran at the Syria talks.

Speaking in the Finnish capital Helsinki on Wednesday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said she had been in regular contact with Annan over his transition plan.

She did not make public details of his proposal, but noted: "I've been in close consultation with special envoy Kofi Annan about the prospects for a meeting that would focus on a roadmap for political transition in Syria."

Annan "has developed his own very concrete roadmap for political transition, he has been circulating it for comments and when I spoke to him yesterday I conveyed our support for the plan that he has put forward," said Clinton.

"We think it embodies the principles needed for any political transition in Syria that could lead to a peaceful, democratic and representative outcome reflecting the will of the Syrian people," she added.

On Wednesday, UN observers deployed to monitor Annan's peace plan visited the headquarters of a pro-government Syrian TV station raided by gunmen earlier in the day.

Seven employees were killed, others kidnapped and buildings were demolished, according to officials.

The government-controlled Syrian TV aired footage of the monitors inspecting the site and talking to the director of the Al-Ikhbariya TV station.

The government blamed "terrorists" and described the killings as a massacre.

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