

**Syria crisis: Russia 'wants Arab League role'**  
**By BBC News**  
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Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has called for a solution to the crisis in Syria based on initiatives put forward by the Arab League.

Visiting Syria, Mr Lavrov said Damascus was ready for a larger Arab mission to monitor peace efforts, and would set a date for a constitutional referendum.

His visit comes after Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution. Gulf states say they are expelling Syria's ambassadors.

Government forces are continuing a fierce assault on rebels in Homs.

The BBC's Paul Wood - one of the only foreign reporters in Homs - says the Syrian army resumed mortar attacks and heavy machine-gun fire after daybreak.

He says Russian-made tanks have been seen close to the city centre, but there is no sign so far of the ground assault feared by many residents.

Hundreds are reported to have died since shelling of the city began on Friday. At least 95 people were killed on Monday alone, activists say.

'Rapid solution'

The Syrian opposition has voiced strong criticism of the stalemate at the UN, saying the Russian and Chinese vetoes on Saturday encouraged the Syria government to step up the assault on Homs.

But after meeting Syrian leaders, Mr Lavrov said President Bashar al-Assad was "fully committed" to ending bloodshed and ready for dialogue with all political forces.

Mr Assad would soon announce a date for a referendum on a new constitution, he added.

"We [Russia] confirmed our readiness to act for a rapid solution to the crisis based on the plan put forward by the Arab League," Mr Lavrov said, though Syrian officials later clarified that he was not referring to the current Arab League plan which calls for Mr Assad to step down in favour of his vice-president.

"Syria is informing the Arab League it is interested in the League's mission continuing its work and being increased in terms of quantity," he added.

The league deployed an observer mission to Syria in December but suspended it in late January amid worsening violence.

In a separate development, Gulf Arab states said they were expelling Syria's ambassadors in the region and recall their own ambassadors in Syria over what they described as the "mass slaughter" of civilians.

The decision comes a day after the US closed its embassy in Damascus and pulled out all remaining staff.

The UK, France, Spain and Italy have also recalled their ambassadors.

'Isolated regime'

Thousands of President Assad's supporters lined the streets of Damascus and waved flags as Mr Lavrov's motorcade drove through the city ahead of his meeting with Mr Assad, in what correspondents described as a hero's welcome.

Mr Lavrov has said Western reaction condemning Russia's veto of the UN Security Council resolution on Saturday bordered on "hysteria".

Moscow has said the draft - which backed an Arab League peace plan calling for President Assad to hand over power - would have forced regime change on Syria.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland urged Mr Lavrov to "use this opportunity to make absolutely clear to the Assad regime how isolated it is and to encourage Assad and his people to make use of the Arab League plan and provide for a transition".

Russia is the main supplier of arms to Damascus. The Syrian port of Tartus is home to Russia's only Mediterranean naval base.

Meanwhile Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told MPs in Ankara: "We will start a new initiative with those countries who stand by the Syrian people, not the regime."

The Syrian government, which has been fighting an uprising against President Assad's rule since March, says it is fighting foreign-backed armed gangs.

Thousands of former army soldiers have defected to the rebel side, forming the Free Syrian Army.

Syria's interior ministry said operations against "terrorist groups" would continue until "security and order are restored" in Homs.

Human rights groups and activists say more than 7,000 people have been killed by Syrian security forces since the uprising began last March.

The UN stopped estimating the death toll in Syria after it passed 5,400 in January, saying it was too difficult to confirm.

President Assad's government says at least 2,000 members of the security forces have been killed.

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