Syria: Russia's Major Diplomatic Advance

The Syrian president Bashar Assad said in an interview to the American Fox News channel that Syria is prepared to surrender chemical weapons to the international community. But he warned all the sides that if they're prepared to dispose of the Syrian stockpile they should be ready to invest around 1 billion dollars in the operation that should take up to a year. Assad also said that he would welcome the UN experts to visit Syria any time they deem possible. When Assad was asked if he's got a message for Obama, he said: "Listen to your people. Follow the common sense of your people. That's enough."

The Assad interview was broadcast a few hours after the negotiations that were held in Damascus between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and his Syrian counterpart - Walid Muallem. After the meeting Sergei Ryabkov said that the Syrian authorities had provided that evidence the rebels were behind chemical weapons usage. "The corresponding materials were handed to the Russian side. We were told that there were evidence that the rebels are implicated in the chemical attack," Ryabkov said. According to his statement, the materials lack any conclusions, but full of technical details and schemes. "These materials are all about facts – they are rich in technical terms and tables, but at the same time they are devoided of any political discords or versions." - Ryabkov has stated.

On September 14 after intense negotiations Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his U.S. counterpart John Kerry have reached an agreement to secure and destroy Syria's chemical weapons. According to this agreement the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons is to prepare a road-map that will be supported by the corresponding UN resolution. Syria authorities have submitted a letter to the OPCW and soon it may become a 190th member.

In his interview Assad said that Syria is willing to hand the chemical substances over to any country that wants to receive them. "As I said, it needs a lot of money. It needs about 1 billion. It is very detrimental to the environment. If the American administration is ready to pay this money and take the responsibility of bringing toxic materials to the United States, why don't they do it?" - Assad said. At the same time he underlined that Syria doesn't put forward any additional conditions, and he stressed that those weapons should be destroyed.

The examination of the evidence that were presented by the Syrian authorities to the Russian diplomats conducted without any haste said Sergei Ryabkov. "There is some confusion in this regard. We received additional proof, which had been gathered and analyzed by the Syrian authorities. They consider it to be evidence of chemical weapons use by the so-called Syrian opposition in eastern Ghouta on the 22nd, 23rd and 24th," Ryabkov told reporters in Damascus on Wednesday. According to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister the information provided by the Syrian side is extremely viable since it's based on the biological samples that were taken at the sites of the attacks. "We have a number of independent experts that are to provide their conclusions based on these facts" - Ryabkov underlined. On top of all the representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Russia would be following the framework agreement that had been reached with with the United States - "This document is the hope of peaceful settlement in Syria, and we will try to make it work". Bashar Assad while the Russian delegation was in Damascus has voiced a number of propositions that are to be transferred to the Russian leader - Vladimir Putin.

At the same time, the head of the Putin administration Sergey Ivanov has announced that Russia has never been
supplying, even during the Cold War era days, sarin gas anywhere. According to his words, the USSR did ship “ground to ground” M-14-series projectiles that were in production in 50-60s but they've hit their deadline storage a long time ago. This statement is supported by the notorious Russian arms expert the head of the Centre for Analysis of Strategies & Technologies Ruslan Pukhov that said: “The projectiles found by the UN experts in the Damascus suburbs were the ancient out-of-service jet-propelled volley fire projectiles that were remade into chemical charged missiles. It’s most unlikely that the USSR has ever shipped any chemical charged projectiles to Syria. The BM-14-17 combat vehicles were discarded from service in the Syrian regular army a long time ago and the projectiles for them “overstayed their welcome” in the warehouses a long time ago.

In his turn the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Sergei Ryabkov said that the Syrian rebels may be partially supporting the Geneva -2 initiative. “We will carry on trying to settle this situation. The peaceful existence of the besieged Aleppo is a top priority, the Kurdish troublesome existence at the North-Eastern parts of Syria should be addressed urgently, there's a big list of topics that have to be dealt with. Today we held a number of meetings at the Russian embassy in Syria, we met with the representatives of the National Coordination Committee, of the National Front for Change and Liberation and we made it very clear for them that the only way out of this is the peaceful negotiations at the “Geneva - 2” tables. And they've acknowledged it.” Ryabkov also expressed concerns over the conditions the Russian civilians are living in in Syria.

Moscow has started a major advance on the diplomatic Syrian front by bringing to the negotiation table a long list of the problems to address, instead of concentrating solely on the chemical weapons. It’s high time to put a peaceful end to the Syrian conflict by establishing contacts between the government and the rebels.

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