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Russia says it will keep selling weapons to Syria

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Russia has no intention of curtailing military cooperation with Syria despite calls from the West to stop arming President Bashar Assad's regime, a senior Russian government official said Tuesday.

Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said Russia will abide by existing contracts to deliver weapons to Syria despite Assad's yearlong crackdown on the opposition, during which the U.N. says over 7,500 people have been killed.

"Russia enjoys good and strong military technical cooperation with Syria, and we see no reason today to reconsider it," Antonov told reporters.

Russia has shielded Syria, its last ally in the Arab world, from U.N. sanctions over the Assad regime's bloody suppression of an uprising against his government.

Moscow has been a steadfast ally of Syria since Soviet times, when it was led by the current president's father, Hafez Assad, and has long supplied Damascus with aircraft, missiles, tanks and other heavy weapons.

The Syrian port of Tartus is now the only naval base Russia has outside the former Soviet Union. A Russian navy squadron made a call there in January in what was seen by many as a show of support for Assad.

Also in January, a Russian ship allegedly carrying tons of munitions made a dash for Syria after telling officials in EU member Cyprus, where it had made an unexpected stop, that it was heading for Turkey. Turkish officials said the ship had instead charted course for Tartus.

Antonov said Russia's supply of weapons to Syria is in line with international law and will continue. "Russian-Syrian military cooperation is perfectly legitimate," he said.

"The only thing that worries us today is the security of our citizens," Antonov said in a reference to Russian military personnel in Syria that are training the Syrians in the use of weapons supplied by Russia.

He declined to say how many of them are currently stationed in Syria.

"It's part of our contractual obligations," said Antonov, who oversees military technical cooperation with foreign countries. "When we supply weapons, we have to provide training."

Antonov dismissed allegations that Russia has sent special forces officers to assist [government forces](#).

"There are no (Russian) special forces with rifles and grenade launchers running around," he said.

Moscow insists it will block any U.N. resolution that could pave the way for a replay of what happened in Libya, where NATO action helped oust Moammar Gadhafi.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who won presidential elections on March 4, has recently accused the West of fueling the Syrian conflict by refusing to also demand from Assad's opponents to pull out from besieged cities along with government troops.

Russian diplomats have dismissed Western hopes for a shift in Moscow's stance on Syria after Putin's election victory as "wishful thinking."

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said after discussing the Syrian crisis at the U.N. on Monday that a cease-fire in Syria would have to be observed by both government forces and the opposition and requires international monitoring.

"Both parties should realize that they will be monitored by independent observers who will see how they observe the demand for an immediate cease-fire that will be put forward," Lavrov said Tuesday at a news conference in Moscow.

"There shouldn't be a situation where there are demands for the government to pull out of cities and villages and no demands put to armed groups" to do the same, he said.

Lavrov said Assad wouldn't agree to withdraw his forces if the opposition fails to respond in kind.

"A unilateral pullout of government forces would be absolutely unrealistic. The Syrian government will not do that," he said.