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U.S., Turkey Strengthen Cooperation on Syria, Clinton Says

By Selcuk Gokoluk
 August 11, 2012
 Businessweek

The U.S. will keep pressure on the Syrian regime and plans stronger cooperation with Turkey on how to respond to the 17-month-old conflict as it deteriorates, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said.

The U.S. and Turkey will create a working group to deal with the impact of refugees from Syria, terrorism and the potential threat of chemical weapons, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said at a joint press conference with Clinton in Istanbul today. Clinton is in the country to hold talks with Turkish President Abdullah Gul, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Syrian opposition groups.

The Obama administration yesterday announced new sanctions on Assad's regime to hasten the end of the conflict that's left more than 21,000 people dead and displaced another 1.5 million. The U.S. is shifting its strategy on Syria from diplomacy through the United Nations to one that's focusing on supporting opposition groups seeking to topple Assad. The U.S. may impose a "no-fly zone" over Syria and take "more aggressive action" against the regime, U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen said yesterday.

"The number of refugees will keep increasing," Clinton said, according to comments broadcast on Turkish television and translated into the local language. "No one can predict when this regime will end. But the Syrian people should take measures to keep their unity, rebuild their economy and secure all dangerous weapons, including chemical weapons."

Humanitarian Aid

Clinton announced an additional \$5.5 million in humanitarian aid to refugees that have fled the violence into Turkey, bringing the U.S.'s total financial support since the start of the crisis to \$82 million.

Davutoglu said some of the attacks by Syrian government forces are war crimes. The U.S. and Turkey are also taking necessary steps to ensure that terrorist groups, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party and Al-Qaeda, don't take advantage of a power vacuum in Syria, he said.

"It is our most basic wish that determined steps be taken to stop this tragedy in Syria," Davutoglu said. "We and the United States have a joint perspective that we should take all necessary measures against terrorist groups."

Clinton's meeting with Turkish officials comes a day before Arab foreign ministers are set to meet in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to discuss the conflict in Syria, according to Egypt's Middle East News Agency. The talks are aimed at finding a replacement for Kofi Annan, who resigned as the United Nations-Arab League special envoy for Syria, MENA reported today, citing Ahmed Ben Helli, assistant secretary-general of the Arab League.

An explosion shook Damascus as rebels attacked government troops in the capital today, Al Arabiya television reported, citing activists. The Syrian state-run television reported that an "armed terrorist group" had blown up an explosive charge in al-Marjeh area in Damascus.

The U.S.'s sanctions announced yesterday target the Syrian state-run oil company, Sytrol, and Hezbollah, the militant Islamist group with close ties to Iran

Haider Karzai
PA/PRS