

Ready to negotiate presidency for peace in Syria, says President Bashar al-Assad

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Damascus: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has said that he is ready to hold a referendum over his presidency in the war-ravaged country. The rebels have been insisting upon the move throughout the almost six-year-old conflict.

File photo of Bashar al-Assad

The Russia- and Iran-backed President said his government was ready to discuss "everything" in the proposed peace talks with rebels, scheduled to take place in Kazakhstan later this month.

In an interview with a French media outlet published by Sana news agency on Monday, Assad, when asked if he would be willing to step down as President, said: "Yes, but my position is related to the Constitution."

"So, if they want to discuss this point, they have to discuss the Constitution, and it is not owned by the government or the President or by the opposition."

The Syrian President said any constitutional matter must be put to a referendum, and it was up to the Syrian people to elect the President.

The talks, brokered by Russia and Turkey, hit a roadblock last week after opposition groups said they had frozen the process in light of continued government strikes across the country.

The Syrian President accused the rebels of violating nationwide truce several times. Assad also defended the Army's push to recapture a rebel-held valley near Damascus where the main water supply to the capital had been turned off.

Assad, in reference to the bombing of east Aleppo, called "every war bad".

"Every war is about the killing and destruction. But how can you liberate the civilians in those (rebel-held) areas from the terrorists? Is it better to leave them under their oppression, where their fate is defined by those terrorists by beheading, by killing, by everything but not having a state?

"...Is that the role of the state, just to keep and watch? You have to liberate, and this is the price some times (the death of civilians)," he said.

Assad's position in the war has been significantly bolstered following the recapture of the northern city of Aleppo in December, which was the last rebel urban stronghold in the country.

Pro-democracy protests in March 2011 escalated and the country descended into civil war as rebel groups formed to fight the Assad government. The conflict is now more than just a battle as it has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country's Sunni majority against Shias, and drawn in regional and world powers, including the US and Russia.

- (With IANS inputs)