

Russia accuses US of trying to derail Syria peace initiative

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File pic of Russian President Vladimir Putin

Moscow: A top Russian diplomat on Wednesday accused the United States of promoting unverified reports about chemical weapons attacks in Syria in order to cloud Russia's peace initiatives.

Russia is hosting Syria peace talks in the Black Sea resort of Sochi next week that some Syrian opposition figures said will run counter to U.N. peace initiatives.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said in an interview with Interfax news agency that the U.S. is promoting "errigged, unverified reports" of the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria to hamper Russia's peace efforts.

Ryabkov's remarks came a day after U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said Moscow "ultimately bears responsibility for the victims" of a new suspected chemical attack outside the Syrian capital Damascus.

Meanwhile, Turkish troops and allied Syrian fighters pressed ahead with operations against a Kurdish-held enclave in northern Syria which was launched Saturday, meeting stiff resistance from the U.S.-allied Kurdish militia that controls the enclave.

France and the United States on Tuesday urged Turkey to exercise restraint in its offensive on Afrin in northern Syria, where the United Nations says an estimated 5,000 people have been displaced by the fighting. The U.N. said most of the displaced are still inside Afrin because Kurdish forces are preventing civilians from leaving and Syrian government forces are keeping them out of adjacent areas.

U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis on Tuesday chastised Turkey for its offensive against the Kurds, saying that it "distracts the international efforts" from targeting the remaining forces of the Islamic State group in the region.

On Tuesday, the Kurdish militia, known as the People's Defense Units or YPG, regained control of a village in Syria's north breached by Turkish forces. The Turkish forces were also repelled from a hill they seized a day earlier on the eastern edge of the district.

The YPG is a key U.S. ally against IS and played a major role in driving the extremists from much of northern and eastern Syria. The U.S. military operates bases in Kurdish-controlled territory in northern Syria but not in or near Afrin.

At least 27 civilians, including eight children and four women, have been killed in the fighting in Afrin, mainly in Turkish airstrikes, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based group that monitors the civil war.

- AP