

United Nations to support French-Russian aid in Syria after initial denial

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The 50 tonnes of aid arrived at Russia's Hmeimim military base in northwestern Syria from France on Saturday and came after an agreement reached between President Emmanuel Macron and Russian leader Vladimir Putin in Moscow following talks since May.

Pro-government forces retook the eastern Ghouta region from rebels in April after besieging the region for years and launching a brutal bombing campaign with their Russian allies. (Source: REUTERS/File)

Paris: The United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Syria said on Tuesday it was ready to provide support to a Franco-Russian initiative to deliver medical aid to government-controlled eastern Ghouta after earlier saying it would not.

France had said the cargo would be distributed under the independent supervision of a UN team so it could guarantee where and when it would go. A French diplomatic source said on Friday it was "not entrusting the aid with the Red Crescent".

The 50 tonnes of aid, including blankets, clothes and tents, arrived on a Russian plane to Russia's Hmeimim military base in northwestern Syria from France on Saturday and came after an agreement reached between President Emmanuel Macron and Russian leader Vladimir Putin in Moscow following talks since May.

"The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) will be distributing the aid and there is no UN supervision of the operation, contrary to previous reports," a UN spokeswoman in Damascus said on Tuesday.

However, OCHA's Syria office later contradicted those remarks on its Twitter feed.

"OCHA Syria welcomes the recent French-Russian initiative to deliver humanitarian aid to Eastern Ghouta. OCHA stands ready to provide whatever support is needed to ensure this important humanitarian operation is a success," it said. OCHA officials did not immediately respond to requests for clarification.

If delivery is delayed or goes astray, it could be embarrassing for Macron, who has for several months attempted to nurture a dialogue with Putin on Syria to break the deadlock on aid "as well as dashing the hopes for help of those in need.

Pro-government forces retook the eastern Ghouta region from rebels in April after besieging the region for years and launching a brutal bombing campaign with their Russian allies.

Since then little aid has entered eastern Ghouta, where about 500,000 people live.

France's Foreign Ministry said on Monday the aid had been "turned over to the UN, which will supervise its distribution".

"The remarks reported by OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) office in Damascus are not in line with the agreement reached with the Russians and the United Nations," a ministry source told Reuters on Tuesday.

•We are currently making the necessary clarifications and are confident that this humanitarian operation will be completed. •

SARC published pictures on Twitter of it taking charge of the aid, saying that it would go to needy people among the most vulnerable but giving no timetable for distribution.

SARC, made up of volunteer aid workers, says it is a neutral humanitarian organisation but several aid sources suspect it comes under heavy pressure from Damascus. Dozens of volunteers have been killed in bombings and shelling during the fighting.

Macron considers aid delivery a first step to forging a wider political discussion with Russia to ultimately bring together international players to end the seven-year civil war.

Russia was also not supposed to take part in its distribution because Paris wanted the initiative to not be derailed for political purposes, French officials said.

France, which has backed opponents to Assad in the seven-year civil war, cut off diplomatic ties with Damascus in 2011.

- Reuters