

Syria says it does not want to fight with Turkey

18/06/2019 17:45 by admin

Russia, which supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in his country's civil war, and Turkey, long a backer of rebels, co-sponsored a de-escalation pact for the area that has been in place since last year. But the deal has faltered in recent months, forcing hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee.

A man watches as smoke rises after what activists said was an air strike on Atimah, Idlib province (REUTERS/Ammar Abdullah/File Photo)

Beijing: Syria does not want to see fighting with Turkey, its foreign minister said on Tuesday, after Turkey said one of its observation posts in Syria's Idlib region was attacked from an area controlled by Syrian government forces.

Russia, which supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in his country's civil war, and Turkey, long a backer of rebels, co-sponsored a de-escalation pact for the area that has been in place since last year. But the deal has faltered in recent months, forcing hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee. Idlib is the last remaining bastion of anti-government rebels after eight years of civil war.

"We hope that our military and the Turkish military do not fight. This is our principled stance," Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem told reporters in Beijing, standing alongside the Chinese government's top diplomat, State Councillor Wang Yi. "What we are fighting is terrorists, especially in Idlib, which is Syrian territory, part of our country," Moualem said in Arabic comments translated into Chinese.

The dominant force in the Idlib region is Tahrir al-Sham, the latest incarnation of the former Nusra Front that was part of al Qaeda until 2016. Others, including some with Turkish backing, also have a presence. "The question now is, what does Turkey want to do in Syria? Turkey is occupying part of Syrian soil, and has a military presence in certain parts of Syria," Moualem added.

"Are they protecting the Nusra Front? Are they protecting certain terrorist forces including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement?" he said, referring to an extremist group China blames for attacks in far western Xinjiang with operations elsewhere.

"This question needs to be asked of Turkey, what are their actual aims? We are fighting those terrorist groups and organisations. The whole world believes those people we are fighting are terrorists."

Since April, Syrian government forces have stepped up shelling and bombing of the area, killing scores of people. The rebels say the government action is part of a campaign for an assault that would breach the de-escalation pact.

The government and its Russian allies say the action is in response to rebel violations, including the presence of fighters in a demilitarised zone. China has long urged that a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian civil war be found and has hosted Syrian government and opposition figures.

Wang said that China will continue to support Syria to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity and fight against terror, and will help with Syria's economic reconstruction efforts.

- Reuters