

## **UN Diplomat Says Syria Talks to Continue Saturday In the News January 25, 2014**

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and the opposition coalition opened in Geneva, Switzerland. But the two sides refused to hold direct negotiations.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moualem is leading the government delegation. He announced he would leave if the talks do not get serious by Saturday. At the same time, a leader of the opposition delegation rejected the idea of face-to-face negotiations. Badr Jamous said there will be no direct talks until the government team accepts what is called the Geneva 1 communique. That document is supposed to be the starting point for the talks.

The Geneva 1 communique calls for the establishment of a temporary government in Syria. The opposition and its allies say that means Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must leave office. The president and his allies disagree.

The United Nations and Arab League diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi is taking part in the talks between the government and the opposition. He met with the two sides separately on Friday. The diplomat had predicted that this kind of dispute might delay the talks. But he expressed hope that he could get the two delegations to sit down together. Late Friday, Mr. Brahimi said the talks will continue on Saturday, in his words, "in the same room."

Observers had predicted such difficulties. On Wednesday, the Syrian foreign minister and opposition leader made conflicting statements at an international conference in nearby Montreux, Switzerland.

David Butter is a Syria expert with London's Chatham House. He sees little hope of progress during the current talks.

"Both Syrian sides have got very different objectives going into it. And also, it's in a context where you can't really see either party to the internal conflict actually having any sort of decisive advantage, which would be the basis of some sort of bargaining process."

The distrust is making it difficult for the negotiations to move forward.

The UN says more than nine million Syrians urgently need aid and many of them cannot be reached because of the fighting. The three-year long Syrian conflict has killed an estimated 100 thousand people.

For weeks, diplomats have been preparing for the talks in Switzerland. Last Sunday, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon invited Iran to take part in the one-day meeting at Montreux. But the Syrian National Coalition, threatened to boycott the talks if they included Iran. The United States said the only way Iran could take part was by supporting the establishment of a temporary government in Syria with full executive powers. This was an idea presented in the "Geneva 1 Communique". But, Iran has refused to say it supports the communique.

That forced Mr. Ban's spokesman to announce that Iran would not be attending the meeting in Montreux, nor the talks in Geneva.

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