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GENEVA: Syrian government's delegation and the UN Syria envoy are seen during a round of negotiations on Syrian peace talks at the United Nations Office in Geneva yesterday.—AFP

US VOWS TO WORK WITH RUSSIA FOR SYRIA PEACE

KERRY MEETING PUTIN AND LAVROV • BATTLE RAGES FOR PALMYRA

GENEVA/MOSCOW: US Secretary of State John Kerry, ahead of a meeting with Vladimir Putin, said the United States and Russia must work together to end the war in Syria despite their differences, and called for a further reduction in violence and more aid deliveries.

Russia and the United States have emerged as the two outside powers with a decisive say in what happens next in Syria's five year-old civil conflict. Ahead of talks with the Russian leader in Moscow, Kerry said a fragile partial truce had cut levels of violence, but he wanted to see a further reduction plus greater flows of aid.

Kerry's visit came as Syrian state television said government forces had fought their way into Palmyra, with the army backed by Russian air cover seeking to recapture the historic city from Islamic State insurgents. Syrian government and opposition parties at peace talks in Geneva were expected to agree yesterday to a document drawn up by a UN special envoy outlining basic principles, in what one diplomat described as a "baby step" forward. Kerry is also expected to press Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the future of President Bashar Al-Assad. While the United States wants Assad to step aside, Russia says only the Syrian people can decide his fate at the ballot box.

Washington believes that Moscow, closely allied to Assad, can nudge Damascus to make important concessions. Kerry said it was encouraging that Russia and the United States had cooperated "despite differences ... in the face of this urgency to do what is necessary to meet the challenge."

He said there was a hope that his meetings in Moscow could "further find and chart the road ahead so that we can bring this conflict in

Syria to a close as fast as possible". The United States and its allies have been backing armed groups that rose up against Assad's rule, while Moscow has asserted its role with a five-month military campaign that turned the tide of the fighting in Assad's favour.

In their brief remarks at the start of the meeting, Lavrov and Kerry did not directly address the Geneva talks, which are being brokered by the United Nations. Talks were due to adjourn yesterday after almost two weeks and to resume in April.

SLOW PROGRESS

The Geneva talks are part of a diplomatic push launched with US and Russian support to end the war in Syria that has killed more than 250,000 people, created the world's worst refugee crisis and bred the rise of Islamic State. Progress has been slow, with government officials avoiding any talk on the divisive issue of a political transition or the fate of Assad, who opposition leaders say must leave office.

But UN envoy Staffan de Mistura has said he aimed to establish if there were any points held in common by the different parties and if successful, to announce them. "Basic principles have been laid out. De Mistura wants to announce that all sides have agreed so that he can move on to the transition issue at the next round," said a senior Western diplomat. "It's a baby step, but a necessary step. It's not a bad result." A summary of the document seen by Reuters contains points including reforming state institutions, rejecting terrorism unequivocally and implementing United Nations Security Council resolution 2254 that guarantees a political transition of power.

It also calls for no tolerance of acts of revenge from either side, rebuilding the Syrian

army on national criteria, ensuring a democratic non-sectarian state and preserving women's rights in fair representation.

BATTLE FOR PALMYRA

On the battlefield, the battle was raging for Palmyra, which fell to Islamic State militants last year and which the Syrian army launched a concerted effort to recapture this month. A monitoring group said the fighting was still outside the city, after a rapid advance the day before brought the army and its allies right up to its outskirts.

The Russian and US-backed cessation of hostilities in place elsewhere in Syria does not

cover Islamic State. The state-run news channel Ikhbariya broadcast images from just outside Palmyra and said government fighters had taken over a hotel district in the west. A soldier interviewed by Ikhbariya said the army and its allies would press forward beyond Palmyra.

"We say to those gunmen, we are advancing to Palmyra, and to what's beyond Palmyra, and God willing to Raqqa, the centre of the Daesh gangs," he said, referring to Islamic State's de facto capital in northern Syria. The state news agency SANA showed warplanes flying overhead, helicopters firing missiles, and soldiers and armored vehicles approaching the city.— Reuters



MOSCOW: This NASA photo shows US Secretary of State, John Kerry as he meets with NASA astronaut Scott Kelly to discuss his year aboard the International Space Station yesterday in Moscow.—AFP