

# *Russian foreign minister says U.S. refusal to reconstruct Syria ploy to impede refugees return*

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Moscow, August 21 (RHC)-- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov says the United States' refusal to participate in the reconstruction of war-torn Syria is aimed to “artificially slow down” the return of Syrian refugees to their home country.

The top Russian diplomat made the comment in a joint press conference with his Lebanese counterpart, Gebran Bassil, in the capital Moscow on Monday, adding that Washington was only interested in reconstructing those parts of the Arab country where the anti-Damascus armed opposition groups were present.

“A few days ago, Washington hosted a meeting between [UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan de Mistura and [US Secretary of State] Mike Pompeo, and the State Department used the phrase 'it is premature to even discuss the restoration of Syria' in the statement following their talks,” Lavrov said.

Elsewhere in his comments, he stressed that Moscow would help Beirut return Syrian refugees to their country, adding that Lebanon should not become a hostage to the Syrian refugee crisis. However, he

noted that Moscow was opposed to foreign intervention in Lebanon's internal affairs.

Lavrov's remarks came two days after Russian President Vladimir Putin called on European countries to build up humanitarian aid to the Syrian people and to reconstruct the Arab country to ensure that Syrian refugees were able to return to their homeland, warning that a renewed refugee crisis would be a "disruptive burden" for Europe. Russia's top diplomat further said there were around 5 million refugees in the countries neighboring Syria, including around one million in Lebanon only.

Russia's Defense Ministry confirmed in early August that it had sent a letter to Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford with a proposal to cooperate on reconstructing Syria and repatriating refugees to the war-torn country.

The Russian army's chief of staff General Valery Gerasimov sent the letter to Dunford on July 19, saying Moscow was willing to cooperate with Washington in demining the Arab country and helping refugees return to their homes.

In the letter, Gerasimov said Moscow was ready to "work with the Syrian authorities to provide security guarantees to refugees in the Rukban camp in the U.S.-controlled Al-Tanf area and to create conditions for their return to their homes."

Addressing the UN Security Council last week, Russian Deputy Ambassador Dmitry Polyansky urged world powers to help Syria's economic recovery and the return of refugees as Damascus nears final victory over terrorist groups.

Polyansky said the "revival of the Syrian economy" was a "critical challenge," with Syria facing an acute shortage of construction material, heavy equipment and fuel to rebuild areas destroyed by war.

In July, Moscow also sent a proposal to Washington to jointly organize the return home of Syrian refugees from Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt that would involve international financial support.

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