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AFP

Obama approves aid package to Syrian rebels

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US President Barack Obama has approved non-lethal US aid, including communications equipment and medicines for Syria's rebels, and plans to increase the package over time, a US official said Friday.

The administration had previously indicated it would take such a step, in line with an initiative by the international "Friends of Syria" group to bolster opponents of President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

"Consistent with our longstanding efforts to support the peaceful opposition in Syria, the US is providing non-lethal material assistance to the non-violent, political opposition," the official said.

The medical supplies and communications equipment includes items the opposition asked for to help civilians in need and to organize themselves to combat "brutality" by government forces, the official said.

"It's likely deliveries of this assistance will increase over time."

The rebels are badly outgunned by Syria's armed forces but the White House has said that it does not favor arming them, arguing that further "militarizing" the conflict would worsen civilian bloodshed.

Washington has also ruled out unilateral military action in Syria, and says there is no coalition for multilateral action like that which ousted Libya's Moamer Kadhafi last year.

Thousands of Syrians marched on Friday to test the regime's commitment to a UN-backed peace plan, and the fragile two-day-old ceasefire was again shaken when security forces killed eight civilians.

The crackdown has killed an estimated 10,000 people.

Also on Friday, the Obama administration said that it saw a "notable reduction" of violence in Syria following the ceasefire deal brokered by UN envoy Kofi Annan, but that the Damascus government needed to do more to meet its conditions.

"They need to pull their forces out of these cities," said Ben Rhodes, a deputy US national security advisor.

"They need to respect the right of peaceful protest across Syria, they need to provide for humanitarian access and they need to demonstrate a commitment to a political transition that's responsive in the Syrian people."