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<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/24/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE90N0RP20130124>

France sees no sign Syria's Assad will be toppled soon

1/24/2013

France said on Thursday there were no signs that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is about to be overthrown, something Paris has been saying for months was just over the horizon.

The uprising against Assad's rule is now almost two years old. 60,000 Syrians have been killed and another 650,000 are now refugees abroad, according to the United Nations.

France, a former colonial ruler of Syria, has been one of the most vocal backers of the rebels trying to topple Assad and was the first to recognize the opposition coalition.

"Things are not moving. The solution that we had hoped for, and by that I mean the fall of Bashar and the arrival of the (opposition) coalition to power, has not happened," Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said in his annual New Year's address to the press.

Fabius told RFI radio in December "the end is nearing" for Assad. But on Thursday, he said international mediation and discussions about the crisis that began in March 2011 were not getting anywhere. "There are no recent positive signs," he said.

He said Syrian opposition leaders and representatives of some 50 nations and organizations would meet in Paris on January 28 to discuss how to fulfill previous commitments.

Assad has resisted all attempts at forcing him to step down and has led a ruthless crackdown on what he calls a foreign-backed terrorists.

The president was shown on Syrian state television on Thursday visiting a mosque to celebrate the birth of Prophet Mohammad. Assad shook hands with government members and smiled but did not make a speech.

Meanwhile, Syrian army forces bombarded opposition-held areas of the country with artillery and air strikes and insurgents clashes with infantry, opposition activist said.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights which monitors violence in Syria, said that six civilians, including a woman and two children, were killed in Homs on Thursday when a plane bombed their house.

On the southwestern edge of the capital, artillery hit the rebel-held district of Daraya, residents in Damascus said.

"There was very loud shelling overnight from the mountain onto Daraya," said a resident of central Damascus. Assad's army has used the Qasioun mountain range to the west of Damascus as high ground to shell opposition districts.

"(The explosions) sounded like huge trucks falling from the sky, one huge truck at a time," the resident said on condition of anonymity. "I felt my windows shake."

The army and insurgents have been stuck in a military stalemate for weeks, but rebels have been able to capture some military bases.

This week, rebels took control of a missile base in the country's north, according to opposition footage, potentially gaining access to powerful long-range weapons.

Video posted on the Internet on Wednesday showed images of fuel tanks and at least 17 trucks with mounts for several-meters-long missiles, although they appeared to have had the missiles removed.

"(There are) fuel tanks in addition to missiles and the whole battalion was taken over by the rebels," said a voice off camera. Text accompanying the video said that the Battalion 599 base, 12 miles (20km) south of Aleppo, was overrun on Tuesday.

But the army has fortified positions in the capital and in major military bases and it is rare that either side makes a significant advance.

While France has ruled out sending the rebels weapons, it has pushed the European Union to review its arms embargo.

Paris and other Western allies have so far failed to convince Russia and China, who have continued to block stronger U.N. action against Assad, to change their stance.

"France continues, like others, to try find a solution so that Bashar is replaced and that a united Syria that respects all communities is achieved. However, we are far from it," Fabius said.