

Syria, Iran say Assad to remain in power until '14

ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAMASCUS, Syria — Iran and Syria condemned a U.S. plan to assist rebels fighting to topple President Bashar Assad on Saturday and signaled the Syrian leader intends to stay in power at least until the 2014 presidential elections.

The remarks came against the backdrop of a strategic victory for the regime as the military regained control over a string of villages along a key highway to open a potential supply route in Syria's contested north.

The army command boasted of the achievement in a statement, saying it had eradicated the remnants of "terrorist agents and mercenaries" in the area that links the government-controlled central city of Hama with Aleppo's international airport.

The reversal of gains, confirmed by Syrian activists, has the potential to change the outcome of the battle in Aleppo, Syria's largest city where government troops and rebels have been in a stalemate for months.

Rebels seek arms

Syrian rebels have long complained they are hampered by the world's failure to provide heavier arms to help them battle Assad's better-equipped military. The international community is reluctant to send weapons partly because of fears they might fall into the hands of extremists who have been gaining influence among the rebels.

But U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry announced Thursday that the Obama administration was giving an additional \$60 million in assistance

to Syria's political opposition and would, for the first time, provide non-lethal aid directly to the rebels.

Assad told England's Sunday Times, in an interview timed to coincide with Kerry's first foreign trip as the top U.S. diplomat, that "the intelligence, communication and financial assistance being provided is very lethal."

In their first official statements on the U.S. decision, the Syrian and Iranian foreign ministers accused Washington of having double standards and warned it will only delay an end to the civil war.

Iran backs Assad

Iran is a staunch ally of the Syrian regime and has stood by the embattled Assad throughout the conflict.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem and his Iranian counterpart, Ali Akbar Salehi, also set clear parameters for any future talks with the opposition, saying that whether Assad stays or goes will be decided in presidential elections scheduled for next year. Salehi also said Assad might run for another term.

"Assad is Syria's legal president until the next elections," Salehi said at a joint news conference in Tehran. "Individuals have the freedom to run as candidates. Until that time, Assad is Syria's president."

Al-Moallem said the Syrian people have the right to choose their leaders through the ballot box.

Assad was quoted by the Sunday Times as saying he had no intention of going into exile. He said "no patriotic person will think about living outside his country."