



Photo by: REUTERS

'Russian ships gathering off Syria to deter West'

By JPOST.COM STAFF
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'Sunday Times' quotes Russian diplomat as saying Russian marines being deployed to deter ground op; Assad to speak.

Russia has concentrated five landing ships in the eastern Mediterranean in a show of force meant to deter Western nations from intervening militarily in Syria, *The Sunday Times* quoted a Russian diplomat as saying.

According to the report, the ships are carrying military vehicles and hundreds of Russian marines, and are being accompanied by combat vessels.

While officially Russia has claimed the ships have been deployed to partake in an exercise to "improve the management, maintenance and testing of the interaction of naval forces," the *Times* quoted the diplomat as saying the marines were meant to deter the West from deploying ground forces in the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad.

"Russia should be prepared for any developments, as it believes the situation in Syria might reach its peak before Easter," the *Times* quoted the diplomatic source as saying.

The report came as Assad was set to make his first public speech on the uprising against his rule in months.



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With insurgents fighting their way closer to the seat of his power, state media said in a statement that Assad would speak on Sunday morning about the "latest developments in Syria and the region", without giving details.

Since Assad's last public comments, in November, rebels have strengthened their hold on swathes of territory across northern Syria, launched an offensive in the central province of Hama and endured weeks of bombardment by Assad's forces trying to dislodge them from Damascus's outer neighborhoods.

Syria's political opposition has also won widespread international recognition. But Assad has continued to rely on support from Russia, China and Iran to hold firm and has used his air power to blunt rebel gains on the ground.

The United States military said US troops and equipment had begun arriving in Turkey on Friday to oversee the deployment of US and European Patriot surface-to-air missile batteries to the Turkish-Syrian border.

Turkey and NATO say the missiles are a safeguard to protect southern Turkey from possible Syrian missile strikes. Syria and allies Russia and Iran say the deployments could spark an eventual military action by the Western alliance.

Reuters contributed to this report.