Erdogan Warns Syria Offensive Will Resume Unless Kurds Complete Pull Out

22/10/2019

Ankara, Turkey: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday threatened to resume Turkey's military offensive in Syria "with greater determination" unless the withdrawal of Kurdish fighters is completed under a US-brokered deal.

"If the promises given to our country by the United States are not kept, we will continue our operation from where we left off with greater determination," Erdogan told reporters before departing for talks with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

Following a deal with US Vice President Mike Pence last week, Turkey announced a 120-hour suspension of the offensive from last Thursday under which Kurdish fighters were to withdraw to allow a "safe zone" to be set up along the border.

Erdogan was to meet with Putin in the Black Sea resort of Sochi later Tuesday as the end of the 120-hour deadline approaches.

"We will have the opportunity to discuss steps to end (Kurdish fighters') presence in regime-held areas," the Turkish leader said.

Erdogan last week said he was not bothered by the Damascus regime's presence in several regions along the Turkish border.

Erdogan also firmly rejected a call by French President Emmanuel Macron to extend the ceasefire.

"There is no such proposal that was conveyed to me from Macron. Macron is in fact talking about such things mostly with terrorists," Erdogan said, referring to a meeting between Jihane Ahmed, the spokeswoman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the French leader.

"He preferred to communicate the terrorists' offer to us. France is not our interlocutor," Erdogan said, adding that Turkey was in touch with the United States over Syria.

Macron on Monday told his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin that France wanted to see an extension of the ceasefire by Turkey in northeast Syria, the Elysee Palace said in a statement.

"The president underscored the importance of prolonging the current ceasefire, and of ending the crisis by diplomatic means," the presidency said after a phone call between the two leaders.

Ankara says the YPG is a "terrorist" offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been waging an insurgency inside Turkey since 1984.

The PKK is blacklisted as a terror group by Ankara, the US and the EU.

Erdogan also confirmed the withdrawal of some Kurdish fighters from the proposed safe zone he wants to extend from Jarabulus in northwestern Syria up to the Iraqi border.

"Around 700-800 have withdrawn so far," Erdogan said, adding that the remaining 1,200-1,300 would reportedly also be pulling out.

"We are pursuing it. The process will not be over without a full withdrawal," he warned.

Erdogan also expressed his unease with some Iranian opposition to the Turkish offensive in Syria, adding that Russian President Hassan Rouhani "should have silenced those voices".

"This bothers me and my colleagues," Erdogan said.

Referring to a planned meeting with Macron and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Erdogan said it could take place before or after the NATO summit on December 3-4 near London.