

Envoy Slams UN Chief for Belarus Allegation

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NEW YORK — Russia's ambassador to the United Nations said Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon erred in accusing Belarus of violating an arms embargo on Ivory Coast by sending attack helicopters to support Laurent Gbagbo's effort to retain the presidency.

"This is a regrettable premature statement that was not supported by the facts," Ambassador Vitaly Churkin said of Ban's allegation.

The UN said in a Feb. 27 statement that Ban learned with "deep concern" of the reported arrival of the first shipment of components for three helicopters at the airport in Yamoussoukro. Ban called for the Security Council to meet "urgently" to discuss the report and "take all necessary action" to prevent use of the helicopters.

Belarus denied the report, which couldn't be verified because UN officials seeking visual confirmation came under fire at the airport from forces loyal to Gbagbo.

"Before going public that information should have been verified," Churkin said Tuesday. "I

think there are some serious questions that need to be asked."

Churkin said Russia was told that a message about the helicopters to UN headquarters from the peacekeeping mission in Ivory Coast was "garbled" to mistakenly indicate that the shipment's arrival had been verified. Russia raised the incident with Ban's office, Churkin said, calling it "much ado about nothing."

Martin Nesirky, Ban's spokesman, said a panel of experts appointed by the Security Council to monitor implementation of the arms embargo reported that it had received information about the shipment and that, "given the seriousness of the matter, it was decided it needed to be raised publicly."

Nesirky said the UN hasn't been able to verify the shipment because the peacekeeping mission's freedom of movement is severely restricted by Gbagbo's forces. Efforts to verify the reports are continuing, he said.

Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer, has been divided between a government-controlled south and a rebel-held north since a 2002 uprising of army soldiers. The insurgents back Alassane Ouattara, the internationally recognized winner of the Nov. 28 election. Gbagbo, who has led the West African nation for the past decade, refuses to cede power, alleging voter fraud in parts of the north.

Ambassador Maria Viotti of Brazil, who heads the Security Council committee on Ivory Coast sanctions, said that "most likely there was no delivery." She said the government of Belarus told the committee there had been no flights to Belarus, and that so far there "is no evidence" of actual delivery of helicopters.

"There was a suspicion, and this wouldn't be just any normal or expected embargo breach," Viotti said. "It would change the balance of forces there, so there was a concern."

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