

Russia to Reject U.N. Syria Draft

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Russia said Thursday that it opposed any U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria, stepping up its threat to veto a Western-backed draft condemning the country's crackdown on protesters.

"Russia is against any U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told journalists at a briefing in Moscow.

"We do not believe the Syrian issue is a subject for consideration by the Security Council, let alone the adoption of some kind of resolution," Lukashevich said.

"The situation in [Syria], in our view, does not present a threat to international peace and security," he said, repeating Russia's position that the "Syrians themselves" should resolve the violent confrontation "without any outside influence."

Britain, France, Germany and Portugal have floated a new draft resolution condemning Syria as the United States and its allies seek to raise the pressure on President Bashar al-Assad's government to end its violent crackdown on protesters.

Lukashevich stopped short of saying Russia would use its veto power as a permanent U.N. Security Council member to doom any Syria resolution if it comes to a vote.

Some diplomats have said they thought that Moscow could be persuaded to abstain, as it did in a March vote on the resolution that authorized military intervention in Libya.

But Lukashevich said that even discussion in the Security Council could increase tension in Syria, and that a resolution criticizing Damascus would amount to tacit support of "armed extremists" opposing the government.

"This does not fit the role of the United Nations," he said.

The spokesman said al-Assad's government has taken "important steps" toward implementing promised reforms. "It's necessary to allow time for them to be put in practice."

Russia has accused Western nations conducting air strikes in Libya of violating the Security Council's mandate to protect civilians and warned that it will be more careful about any further resolutions over unrest in the Arab world.

President Dmitry Medvedev said last month that Russia would not back a similar resolution on Syria even if asked to do so by "friends," signaling to the United States and other Western nations that they should not seek Security Council action.

Unlike the Libya measure, however, the draft presented on Wednesday would not authorize military intervention. It would denounce violence against security forces in addition to condemning killings and other abuses by the authorities.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has warned that if any country in the 15-nation council votes against the resolution or vetoes it: "That should be on their conscience."

But after allowing Western intervention in Libya, acceding to a resolution on Syria could open Medvedev up to domestic criticism of weakness in the face of the West. Russia is also likely wary of angering Syria, a traditional ally in the region since the Soviet era and an arms client.

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