

Moscow Says Not Time for Damascus Sanctions

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UNITED NATIONS — Russia's UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, said Moscow does not think it is time to impose sanctions that Western countries are seeking on Syria over its five-month crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators.

Churkin spoke Tuesday shortly before the United States and European nations on the UN Security Council delivered a draft sanctions resolution on Syria to the 15-nation body.

Russia, along with Britain, China, France and the United States, has the power to veto any resolution, and Churkin's remarks suggested that persuading Moscow to back tough measures would not be easy for the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Portugal, the drafters of the sanctions text.

Asked as he was going into a regular Security Council meeting whether it was time for sanctions on Damascus, Churkin told reporters: "No, we don't think so."

Russia is not alone. China, South Africa, Brazil and India have indicated that they would have

trouble supporting punitive measures against Damascus. Council resolutions need nine votes in favor and no vetoes in order to pass.

Several council diplomats said in interviews Tuesday that the draft resolution called for sanctions against about 20 Syrians, including President Bashar Assad. They also said the draft contained the threat of a referral of the Syrian crackdown to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Diplomats say an earlier version called for an actual referral of the Syrian violence against protesters to the court, as happened in the case of Libya earlier this year.

After referring Libya, the court issued warrants for the arrest of leader Moammar Gadhafi, his son Saif Islam and his intelligence chief.

The draft resolution also proposes the blacklisting of four Syrian companies, diplomats said on condition of anonymity.

Typically, UN sanctions against individuals include an international travel ban and mandatory freezing of any financial assets. Sanctioned companies face an asset freeze, and it becomes illegal for any firm to do business with them.

A senior Western diplomat hinted last week that the proposed sanctions could include an arms embargo. Moscow might have trouble with that because Russia is a longstanding arms supplier for Damascus. It was not immediately clear whether the latest version included an arms embargo.

Churkin did not comment on any specific sanctions measures being proposed.

"There are some ideas being floated, but those are initial ideas," he said. "But we are comfortable within the scope of the Aug. 3 statement."

The United Nations says 2,200 people have been killed in Syria since the crackdown against protesters began in March, and its Human Rights Council opened an investigation on Tuesday into the violence, including possible crimes against humanity, despite objections from Russia and China.

Churkin said Russia believed that the 15-nation council had stated its position clearly in its Aug. 3 statement, in which it called for an end to the violence and condemned the use of force by Syrian authorities.

"We hope to see progress, we hope to see dialogue established in Syria," he said. "We think we should continue to work within the scope of that unified position."

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