

Lavrov Calls Anger on Syria Veto 'Hysteria'

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov making the rounds in the Middle East. **Denis Sinyakov**

Western anger at Moscow's decision to block a UN resolution on Syria has approached hysteria, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Monday, a day after U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called it a travesty.

Lavrov plans to travel to Damascus along with Russia's foreign intelligence chief on Tuesday for talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad, who faces pressure from the West, Arab states and opponents at home to step down.

Defending Moscow's decision to veto a Western-Arab draft in the Security Council that had urged Assad to give up power, Lavrov said Russia had asked for the vote to be delayed until after his visit. He had announced plans for the Syria trip just hours before the vote on Saturday.

"It is sad that the co-authors decided to hastily put the resolution to a vote, even though we appealed to them with a request to give it a few more days, including to make it possible

to discuss the situation after (the trip)," he said.

The veto, in which Russia was joined by China, sparked expressions of outrage in the United States and Europe as well as among opponents of Assad in Syria. They say Syrian forces killed more than 200 people in Homs on Friday and have continued bombarding the opposition stronghold.

"Some of the voices heard in the West with evaluations of the results of the vote in the UN Security Council on the Syria resolution sound, I would say, improper, somewhere on the verge of hysteria," Lavrov said.

"This brings to mind the saying, 'He who gets angry is rarely in the right,'" he said at a news conference following talks with Bahrain's foreign minister.

Lavrov said Western nations' refusal to postpone the vote "means that it was more important to them to put the blame on somebody for what is happening ... than to reach a consensus in the Security Council, which was completely realistic."

Former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov also defended the veto, saying Washington was seeking to oust Iranian ally Assad to increase its influence in the Arab world and isolate Tehran, which the United States suspects is seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

"Syria has become a victim for the most part because it is close to Iran. The removal from power of the current regime is part of a plan to isolate Iran," Primakov wrote in an article published in Monday's Rossiiskaya Gazeta.

"The United States and its NATO allies want to exploit the situation that arose in the spring of 2011 in the Arab world with the aim of getting rid of Arab regimes it dislikes," wrote Primakov, a Middle East expert who has also been Russia's foreign minister and spy chief.

Lavrov said the draft resolution put too little pressure on the opposition and "armed extremists," who Russia says must share blame for the bloodshed that has killed more than 5,000 people since Assad launched a crackdown on protests 11 months ago.

"Such a resolution would have meant the Security Council was taking the side of one participant in a civil war," he said. ☒

Russia wanted to correct an "imbalance" by requiring armed groups to withdraw from cities at the same time as government forces and "halt attempts to seize whole neighborhoods, which has occurred and continues to occur." ☒

Lavrov declined to say what message he and Foreign Intelligence Service Director Mikhail Fradkov would bring to Assad when they travel to Damascus on Tuesday at the behest of President Dmitry Medvedev.☒He said Russia was pressing Assad's government to implement democratic reforms more swiftly but that some opponents were using a peaceful movement pressing for reforms as a cover to seek "regime change" in Syria.

Lavrov emphasized that Russia favors a peaceful dialogue in Syria that is free of outside interference and preconditions.☒Moscow expressed discontent with earlier versions of the resolution that specifically called for Assad to cede power.

That language was removed in a bid to appease Moscow, but the vetoed draft still contained support for an Arab League plan that called for him to quit. ✘ Assad has given Russia its strongest foothold in the Middle East, buying billions of dollars worth of Russian arms and hosting a naval maintenance and supply facility that is Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union.

Russia's veto signaled that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is likely to win a six-year presidential term next month, will do all he can to protect Russian geostrategic interests and stop the United States and its European allies from imposing their will in regions of common interest.

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