

Serdyukov Seeks Libya Cease-Fire

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Gates paying his respects Tuesday at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. **Mikhail Metzel**

Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov called for an immediate cease-fire in Libya on Tuesday, telling U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates that it is the best way to avoid civilian casualties.

Speaking after meeting Serdyukov, Gates responded that the coalition is already “going to great lengths” to avoid civilian deaths, and charged that Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi is lying about claims of casualties. Gates also insisted that significant military fighting would recede in the next few days once Libya’s air defenses are taken out.

The Libyan military assault has become a point of contention for the Russians, even triggering a rare dispute between the country’s top two leaders, President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

It was unclear Tuesday what impact that may have on the ongoing military action, but the explosive issue further complicated Gates’ meetings with Russian leaders who are already at odds with the United States over plans for a missile defense system in Europe.

Gates wondered aloud about why the Russians believe that so many civilians are being killed.

"I'm a little curious frankly about the tone that has been taken," Gates told reporters traveling with him shortly after his meeting with Serdyukov at the Defense Ministry. "It's perfectly evident that the vast majority, if not nearly all, of the civilian casualties have been inflicted by Gadhafi."

He said most of the targets have been in isolated, unpopulated areas, adding that "it's almost as though some people here are taking at face value Gadhafi's claims about the number of civilian casualties — which as far as I'm concerned are just outright lies."

Gates met with Serdyukov before a scheduled session with Medvedev, who also expressed concern about civilian casualties in Libya.

But Gates did not see Putin, who was out of the country on a trip to Slovenia. On Monday, Putin railed against the strikes on Libya, likening them to "medieval calls for crusades."

Putin appeared to link the Libya action to the ongoing debate between the United States and Russia over the planned European missile defense shield, suggesting that it proved Russia is correct to heighten its own defenses.

Medvedev, however, issued a rare rebuke of Putin's statements, saying that using an expression like "crusades" is unacceptable. And he defended Russia's move to abstain last week on the UN Security Council resolution authorizing military action in Libya, saying the UN move was a legitimate response to Gadhafi's "crimes against his own people."

Standing next to Gates at the end of their meeting, Serdyukov tiptoed carefully through the subject, saying through an interpreter that Russia backs the UN resolution, but it envisions only measures to protect civilians.

Unfortunately, he said, there have been "real hostilities" that are "destroying civilian facilities and killing civilians," and that should not be allowed to happen. An immediate cease-fire, he said, is the surest way to gain the security of the civilians.

"I think he threaded his way pretty well" between Medvedev and Putin, Gates told reporters afterward. "It sounded to me like his comments were closer to President Medvedev."

Putin's spokesman said Tuesday that the prime minister's remarks on the UN resolution authorizing armed intervention in Libya were his own personal opinion while Medvedev expressed Russia's official position.

"The assessment expressed by the prime minister is nothing other than his personal opinion. The assessment expressed by the head of state [Medvedev] is the only official position of the Russian Federation, which everyone is adhering to," Dmitry Peskov told reporters in Slovenia.

Russia's abstention on the UN resolution essentially allowed the military action to go forward. But as the coalition pounded Libyan air defenses and military arms for the third day, it was unclear whether Putin's protest was public posturing or if it actually signaled remorse about the vote.

Meanwhile, even as the United States vows to relinquish the lead in the Libyan operation, there was discord in Europe over whether it should be turned over to NATO. U.S. officials,

including Gates, say the United States expects to hand over leadership, either to NATO or to the British and French, in a matter of days.

Gates said Tuesday that he still believes the transition would go forward within a few days, and that diplomacy was moving along. Transferring control of the mission is complicated, he said. "We haven't done something like this, kind of on the fly before," Gates said. "So it's not surprising to me that it would take a few days to get it sorted out."

Turkey blocked NATO's participation in the operation, while Italy issued a veiled threat to withdraw the use of its bases unless the alliance was put in charge.

France's Foreign Ministry said Russia could bring up its views in favor of a cease-fire in Libya at a UN Security Council meeting on Thursday.

(AP, Reuters)

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