

Russia's NATO Envoy Warns of Libya War

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Communists rallying at the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg on Friday to protest U.S.-led airstrikes on Libya. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

President Dmitry Medvedev has urged U.S. President Barack Obama to help prevent civilian deaths in Libya, even as Russia's NATO envoy warned that the U.S.-led military alliance could be dragged into a full-scale war.

NATO has control of an arms embargo on Libya and agreed last week to assume command of a no-fly zone over its territory, but Washington has been left in control of conducting airstrikes against Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's ground forces.

The United States hopes to hand over control of the airstrikes as soon as possible and said over the weekend that it expected NATO to take command of it soon.

Russian Ambassador Dmitry Rogozin said Saturday that NATO risked being caught in a war in Libya like those being waged in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Just as we forecast, NATO is being drawn deeper and deeper into war in North Africa," Rogozin told Interfax.

"The statements we are hearing today from NATO members and the alliance on the whole could draw this bloc into a full-scale operation on Libyan territory, which means essentially the U.S. and its closest allies could be drawn into a third war in addition to those in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said.

Russia backed United Nations sanctions against Gadhafi and his government earlier this month but abstained in a Security Council vote that authorized a no-fly zone, allowing armed intervention by a Western coalition.

In a phone call with Obama, Medvedev said the deaths of Libyan civilians during Western military intervention must be prevented, the Kremlin said in a statement.

"The president especially noted the necessity of preventing victims among the civilian population," the statement said late last week.

In Washington, the Obama administration said Obama had expressed his appreciation for Russia's support for the UN sanctions and positive statements Medvedev has made about the resolution's mandate.

Gadhafi has accused Western forces of killing dozens of civilians, but his officials have not shown reporters in Tripoli any evidence of such killings. U.S. officials say they have no evidence Western bombs have killed any civilians.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has taken a harder stance than Medvedev, comparing the UN resolution to "medieval calls for crusades." He also said those responsible for civilian deaths in Libya should "pray for the salvation of their souls."

Rights group Memorial responded late last week that Putin should pray for his soul for inflicting a Libya-style bombing on Chechnya a decade ago.

"Putin has visibly completely forgotten about what took place in his own country and about his own implication in those tragic events," Memorial said in a statement. "Maybe the prime minister himself should pray first of all for the salvation of his own soul?"

Putin rose to popularity when he led an invasion of Chechnya in 1999 on the eve of his presidency, starting the second Chechen war.

Meanwhile, Medvedev expressed concern over tensions in North Africa and the Middle East at a meeting Friday with visiting Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, the Kremlin said.

The Saudi foreign minister carried a message from King Abdullah, stressing the need to maintain close coordination of policies between Russia and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and North Africa in the face of recent events.

"The Russian side expressed concern over the sharp jump in tensions in the region," said a statement on the Kremlin web site.

Saudi Arabia has seen unrest rise, especially among its Shiite population as protests have rocked the Arab world in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain this year.

Medvedev and Obama also discussed Russia's troubled bid to join the World Trade Organization and the problems of missile defense in Europe during the phone call, the Kremlin statement said.

The White House said Obama had affirmed his support for Russia's accession this year and his commitment to working with Congress to establish permanent normalized trade relations with Russia.

The two presidents agreed to meet on the sidelines of a Group of Eight summit in France in May.

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