

Lavrov Opposes Arming Libyan Rebels

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned the West on Wednesday against arming rebels battling Moammar Gadhafi's forces and said Libyans must forge their political future without any outside interference.

Lavrov's remarks were the latest criticism of the military action by a Western coalition, which Moscow says has gone beyond the mandate of the UN Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force.

They also indicated that as the United States and Europe press for Gadhafi's eventual exit, Moscow does not want to stand aside and watch the West shape a future government of a country where Russia's arms, energy and railway companies had contracts.

With Western leaders saying they were not ruling out arming the rebels, Lavrov emphasized Russia's opposition.

"Not long ago the French foreign minister announced that France is ready to discuss weapons supplies to the Libyan opposition with its coalition partners," Lavrov told a news conference after talks with his Austrian counterpart.

"Right away, NATO Secretary-General [Anders] Fogh Rasmussen said the Libyan operation is being conducted to protect the population, not to arm it. We fully agree with the NATO secretary-general on this," Lavrov said.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said Wednesday that Britain does not rule out supplying arms to the Libyan rebels but has not taken a decision to do so.

Russia, a veto-wielding permanent UN Security Council member, backed sanctions against Gadhafi's government and abstained in the vote on the resolution authorizing military action to enforce no-fly zones, allowing it to pass.

However, Russia has said the resolution gave the coalition too much leeway and has expressed concern about possible civilian deaths. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, one of the most outspoken critics of the Western intervention, likened it to "medieval calls for crusades."

Lavrov said Wednesday that Moscow might have supported the resolution if it had set clearer limits on military action.

In line with the resolution, which called for a cease-fire and dialogue, he said Russia sees "a cease-fire and the immediate start of talks" as a priority.

Turning to the future, Lavrov said "the Libyan sides must agree on what the Libyan state should be."

"It's clear that it will be a different regime, and it's clear that it should be a democratic regime, but Libyans themselves must decide without influence from outside."

Russia has made similar statements about other nations swept up in a wave of opposition to authoritarian governments across the Arab world.

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