

Moscow Urges Syria to Investigate Protest Deaths

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A Syrian protester beating a poster of Syria's president with a shoe at a Cairo protest against Syrian violence. **Khalil Hamra**

Russia urged Syrian authorities to bring to justice those who are responsible for deaths at anti-government protests Thursday, a day after it blocked a European push for the UN Security Council to condemn Damascus' violent crackdown.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is facing international condemnation after using troops and tanks to put down protests against his 11-year rule.

"We are counting on Damascus to hold an effective and transparent investigation into all the incidents leading to the deaths of people, and that the guilty parties will be brought to justice," Foreign Ministry official Alexei Sazonov said, according to Itar-Tass.

"Violence against peaceful ... demonstrations should be ruled out," Sazonov said.

His comments came after Russia joined China and Lebanon in resisting the United Nations

Security Council statement, saying security forces were also killed and the actions did not threaten international peace.

"A real threat to regional security in our view could arise from outside interference in Syria's domestic situation including attempts to push ready-made solutions or taking of sides," Russia's deputy UN ambassador, Alexander Pankin, warned the UN's most powerful body during a public session that followed closed-door discussions, saying this could lead to civil war.

"It is extremely important to focus all attempts on avoiding such a dangerous turn of events, especially as Syria is a cornerstone of the Middle East security architecture," he said. "Destabilizing this significant link in the chain will lead to complications throughout the region."

Earlier this week Britain, France, Germany and Portugal circulated to the other 11 council members a draft statement condemning the crackdown, in which hundreds have been reported killed, and urging restraint by the Damascus government. They were supported by the United States.

But during consultations Wednesday afternoon, several members were opposed, so at the request of the Europeans and the United States, the Security Council then moved into open session to hear a briefing from the UN political chief and statements from council members.

China and India called for political dialogue and peaceful resolution of the crisis, with no mention of condemnation.

Syria's UN ambassador, Bashar Ja'afari, welcomed the council's inaction and questioned the "unprecedented enthusiasm" by some members for the statement and a "lack of such enthusiasm" for attempting to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

He blamed the violence on "extremist groups whose fundamental objective is clearly the fall of the Syrian government" and said law enforcement had acted with the "utmost restraint" to prevent the killing of civilians. He waved a list of 51 members of the armed forces he said were killed "by armed gangs."

He said the campaign by extremists began as information surfaced of outside parties "financing acts of sabotage." He pointed to a report of the U.S. government financing an opposition satellite television station and opposition figures bent on ousting Assad.

But UN political chief B. Lynn Pascoe, the United States and the Europeans painted a very different picture of events.

Pascoe told the council that "a review of the reports of media, international human rights groups, UN agencies and diplomatic missions confirm that the overwhelming majority of protests have been peaceful and unarmed.

"However, there have been credible reports of a very few instances where protesters have used force, resulting in the deaths of members of the security forces," Pascoe said. He said Human Rights Watch documented just one with eyewitness testimony, on April 8 in Daraa.

"There are no confirmed reports that this is a recurring phenomenon," he said, "neither do we have confirmation of reports of security personnel or soldiers being killed by government agents. Some of the overall confusion on this sensitive issue may stem from the widely reported presence of armed security agents and regime supporters in civilian clothes."

(Reuters, AP)

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