

Ivanov Warns of Libya Ground War

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Ivanov speaking during a security conference in Singapore on Sunday. **Tim Chong**

SINGAPORE — NATO is "one step" from sending troops into Libya to help rebels remove Moammar Gadhafi from power, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said Sunday.

British and French attack helicopters struck for the first time inside Libya on Saturday, having previously relied on attack jets generally flying above 4,500 meters.

"Using attack helicopters, in my view, is the last but one step before the land operation," Ivanov said in Singapore at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, a regional security conference.

Russia abstained from a United Nations Security Council resolution vote in March to impose a no-fly zone over Libya. Ivanov said there has been disagreement over how to interpret the scope of the resolution.

"We thought it was a good resolution to stop civilian casualties and close down Libyan air space," Ivanov said. "But we haven't agreed on what closing down air space means. Later, it apparently meant first bombing and now using attack helicopters. We think it clearly takes one side of the conflict."

President Dmitry Medvedev offered to mediate a deal for Gadhafi to leave Libya during the Group of Eight summit in France in late May. A Russian envoy is scheduled to depart for Libya in the upcoming days.

In the meantime, NATO further intensified pressure on Gadhafi on Sunday, with British jets hitting a military barracks in the Libyan capital.

By intensifying attacks from the air and using helicopters to target government forces that melt into the civilian population for cover, NATO is providing a major boost to Libyan rebel forces that have seized much of the country's east and footholds in the west.

For example, emboldened rebels in recent days have forced government troops from three western towns and broke the siege of a fourth.

Vietnam's defense minister told the Shangri-La security meeting on Sunday that six Kilo class diesel-powered submarines that it was buying from Russia would be used only for self-defense.

"We regard this as a normal activity for the People's Army of Vietnam," Vietnamese Defense Minister General Phung Quang Thanh said.

"That is to defend [the country] and take part in national construction. Vietnam's policy is completely for self-defense, and we would never compromise any other country's sovereignty. But we must deter anyone who tries to compromise Vietnam's sovereignty," he said.

The submarine deal, signed in 2009, is worth \$3.2 billion, according to Russian media.

(AP, Reuters)

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