

Kremlin Envoy Hopes to Bridge Rift in Libya

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BENGHAZI, Libya — A Kremlin envoy arrived in the rebel-held city of Benghazi on Tuesday to bridge the rift in Libya, stepping up Kremlin efforts to play a prominent role in resolving the conflict.

"Some are looking to Benghazi, some are looking to Tripoli. Russia sees its task as building a bridge between these two banks on which Libyan society now stands," said Mikhail Margelov, President Dmitry Medvedev's special envoy to Africa.

Medvedev joined Western partners in urging Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi to step down at a Group of Eight summit last month. He offered Russia's services as a mediator and said he was sending Margelov to Libya, initially to Benghazi.

Analysts say Russia is hoping to preserve influence in a country where it had billions of dollars in arms, energy and railroad deals.

"Russia has a unique situation in Libya now: We have not severed relations with Tripoli; we

have established relations with Benghazi," Margelov told reporters in Benghazi in remarks carried on Rossiya-24 television.

"We are ready, if it's possible, to act as middlemen in establishing an internal Libyan political dialogue. Russia is ready to help politically, economically and in any possible way," Margelov said.

"We ... believe that Gadhafi has lost his legitimacy after the first bullet shot against the Libyan people," he said, adding that democracy in Libya would be achieved through elections that would take place after civil war ends.

Medvedev has said he hoped Margelov would have the opportunity to speak with both sides, but Margelov did not plan to travel to Tripoli on this visit. Margelov said he would leave for Cairo on Wednesday, Interfax reported.

Margelov was to meet Ali Tarhouni, the rebel oil and finance minister, to discuss the financial situation and more effective aid. He was also expected to meet other rebel leaders.

Russia supported an initial UN Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on Gadhafi's government but abstained in a March vote on a second resolution that authorized military intervention. It has accused the Western coalition conducting airstrikes of going beyond its mandate to protect civilians.

Rebels seeking an end to Gadhafi's four-decade rule control the east of Libya from their stronghold in Benghazi, the western city of Misrata and the mountains near the border with Tunisia. They have been unable to advance on Tripoli against Gadhafi's better-equipped forces.

The Libyan capital and vicinity has come under increased attack from NATO bombers in recent days, including rare daylight raids on Tuesday.

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