

Russia to Join 'Friends of Libya' Forum

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A woman flashing the colors of the rebel Libyan flag at a rally in Tripoli. **Alexandre Meneghini**

Russia will take part in a French-hosted "Friends of Libya" conference on Thursday and seek to uphold its interests in the North African nation, President Dmitry Medvedev's Africa envoy said.

"At the president's instruction, Russia will participate in the conference on Libya," Mikhail Margelov said Wednesday. "Our country was one of the first to be invited to this forum."

Margelov will represent Russia at the conference in Paris, where members of a Western-led contact group on Libya and others will discuss support for the political and economic rebuilding of the war-torn state.

Russia has criticized the contact group, and Margelov reiterated Moscow's insistence that the UN Security Council, in which it holds veto power as a permanent member, "must play the key role" in discussions of postwar rebuilding.

But he made clear that Russia, which had billions of dollars worth of arms, energy and infrastructure deals with Libya under longtime ruler Moammar Gadhafi, does not want

to lose out from a change of power in the oil-producing nation.

"We intend to present our view of the process of creating a new statehood in this country, and we also intend to exert some influence on the process and uphold Russian economic and other interests in Libya," he said.

Russia allowed Western military intervention in Libya when it abstained from a Security Council resolution vote in March, but has accused NATO forces carrying out airstrikes of overstepping their mandate to protect civilians.

Medvedev has joined Western nations in urging Gadhafi to give up power. Unlike the United States and other Western nations, however, Russia has not recognized the National Transitional Council as legitimate Libyan authorities.

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