

UN Slams Russia on Syria Monitor Vote

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Syrians watching a broadcast of President Bashar Assad vowing to respond to threats with "an iron hand." **Muzaffar Salman**

UNITED NATIONS — A senior UN official on Tuesday criticized Russia in the United Nations Security Council for vetoing, together with China, a European-drafted resolution that would have condemned Syria's crackdown on anti-government protests.

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice also told the Security Council that Syria accelerated its killing of pro-democracy demonstrators after Arab League monitors arrived.

"In the days since the Arab League monitoring mission has been on the ground, in fact an estimated 400 additional people have been killed, an average of 40 a day, a rate much higher than was the case even before their deployment," Rice told reporters.

Rice said Russia, which blocked the European resolution in October, but last month circulated a draft resolution on Syria that Washington and its European allies had hoped to begin negotiations on, has yet to produce a revised text.

"We think it's long past time that the council passes a strong resolution that supports

the Arab League [and] all the elements of the Arab League resolution, including its call for sanctions," she said.

"Unfortunately after a bit of a show last month of tabling a resolution, the Russians inexplicably have been more or less AWOL [absent without leave] in terms of leading negotiations on the text of that resolution," Rice said.

The United Nations says the crackdown on protests has killed at least 5,000 people, and threatened Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime with sanctions.

Rice was speaking after Lynn Pascoe, the UN under-secretary-general for political affairs, briefed the 15-nation Security Council behind closed doors on Syria and other major crises. She said the figure did not include the more than two dozen people killed in a suicide bombing in Damascus last week.

"That is a clear indication that the government of Syria, rather than using the opportunity ... to end the violence and fulfill all of its commitments [to the Arab League], is instead stepping up the violence," she said.

Earlier on Tuesday, Assad vowed to strike "terrorists" with an iron fist and derided Arab League efforts to halt violence in a 10-month-old revolt against his rule.

The Arab League recently deployed monitors to check Syria's compliance with an Arab peace plan after suspending it from the 22-member body in November.

Rice reiterated Washington's view that it was time for Assad to "step aside and yield to the wishes of the Syrian people for a government that reflects the will of the people."

She added that Washington was "deeply concerned" by reports that two Kuwaiti Arab League monitors "were roughed up, harmed, harassed, hurt in the context of their work."

Syrian Ambassador Bashar Ja'afari rejected Rice's allegations, saying the violence in the country was caused by "terrorists" and "armed groups" that were receiving support from foreign countries.

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