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Russia Pressing for Talks to End Syria Bloodshed

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Syrian fighters hold a sign a reading “Lavrov you are not welcome” while the foreign minister visited Damascus.

The European Union will impose harsher sanctions on Syria, a senior EU official said Wednesday, as Russia tries to broker talks between the vice president and the opposition to calm violence.

Activists reported at least 50 killed in military assaults targeting government opponents.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said outside forces should let Syrians settle their conflict "independently."

"We, of course, condemn all violence regardless of its source, but one cannot act like an elephant in a china shop," Putin told Russian religious leaders in Moscow as talk turned to Libya and Syria.

"Help them, advise them, limit, for instance, their ability to use weapons but not interfere

under any circumstances," Putin said, just days after Russia blocked a UN resolution calling for Syrian leader Bashar Assad to cede power.

"A cult of violence has been coming to the fore in international affairs in the past decade," he said. "This cannot fail to cause concern, ... and we must not allow anything like this in our country."

His comments came as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted Wednesday that the outcome of any talks on ending the bloodshed in Syria must not be predetermined.

"It is not really the international community's business to try to determine the outcome of national dialogue in advance," Lavrov told a news conference in Moscow, a day after returning from an emergency meeting with Assad in Damascus.

Lavrov also said Assad wants his vice president to hold talks with the opposition groups as activists reported that dozens died Wednesday in government bombings of cities and villages across Syria.

He said Assad has "delegated the responsibility of holding such a dialogue to Vice President [Farouk] Sharaa."

Lavrov reiterated Russia's call for countries that have influence with opponents of Assad to press them to enter dialogue with the government. Moscow has accused Western nations of encouraging Assad's opponents to avoid talks.

"We need to get the government and all opposition groups to sit down at the negotiating table," Lavrov said.

Lavrov blamed both Assad's regime and opposition forces for instigating the violence that has killed thousands of people since March.

"On both sides there are people that aim at an armed confrontation, not a dialogue," he said.

His remarks indicated that Russia, which vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution supporting an Arab League call for Assad to quit, has not changed its stance on Syria following his meeting with Assad in Damascus on Tuesday.

His comments came as Syrian troops bombed residential neighborhoods in the central city of Homs, the northern province of Idlib, southern region of Daraa and the mountain town of Zabadani, in what activists say is the regime's final push to retake areas controlled by the rebels.

Activists said at least 50 people died in Wednesday's shelling of Homs, which has been under a relentless regime offensive for the past five days. Hundreds are believed to have been killed there since Saturday.

Syria's state-run TV reported that gunmen fired mortar rounds at the oil refinery in Homs, one of two in Syria, setting two fuel tankers on fire.

Assad's regime is becoming increasingly isolated over its bloody crackdown on dissent. Five

European countries and six Arab Gulf nations have pulled their ambassadors out of Damascus, and the United States has closed its embassy in Syria. Germany, whose envoy left Syria this month, also said he would not be replaced.

Russia said it blocked the UN resolution on Saturday because it believed adopting it would have meant taking sides in a civil war in Syria, where the United Nations says more than 5,400 people have been killed in 11 months of violence that Western nations blame mostly on the state.

Lavrov said the draft, which was backed by Western and Arab nations, put too little pressure on armed opponents of Assad to stop the violence and would have allowed them to occupy cities following the withdrawal of government forces.

He made clear that Russia did not approve of decisions by the United States and other countries to shut their embassies in Syria, saying "we do not understand the logic of this" and that it would not help efforts to resolve Syria's crisis.

Lavrov reiterated Russia's support for an Arab League initiative floated last November that envisaged a withdrawal of troops from cities and towns, the release of prisoners and reforms.

In Damascus on Tuesday, Lavrov said Assad assured him that he was committed to seeking an end to violence by all sides, but he made no suggestion that the government, which blames the bloodshed on armed extremists, would halt its military offensive unilaterally.

Assad said he would cooperate with any plan that stabilized Syria, but made clear that it only included last November's Arab League proposal that called for dialogue and other measures — not a January plan that called for him to cede power.

(AP, Reuters)

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