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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Army Leader Predicts Iran Decision Horizon

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Russia's top general said Tuesday that he expects Iran's enemies to decide in the next few months how to deal with a nuclear program the United States and Israel have said they might attack.

General Nikolai Makarov, the chief-of-staff, was quoted by RIA-Novosti as saying: "Iran, of course, is a sore spot. There has to be some kind of decision about it now. It will be made, probably, closer to summer."

Moscow has warned adamantly against any use of force to rein in Tehran's nuclear program, which the Western powers and Israel say conceals a plan to develop atomic weapons.

The reports of Makarov's remarks to local journalists did not quote the general specifying which of Iran's adversaries he was referring to, nor what they might do or when.

However, in recent weeks there has been renewed speculation, fueled by remarks from U.S. and Israeli officials, that one, the other or both of those countries might launch strikes

on Iran.

As Prime Minister Vladimir Putin campaigns for a presidential election next month, Moscow has been keen to make its voice heard on the Middle East, vetoing a UN condemnation of Syria's leader and criticizing Western hostility toward Iran.

Russian officials have said aggressive language and speculation about a strike have aggravated tensions and set back efforts to end Iran's pursuit of uranium enrichment.

They also use the talk of war as part of a portrayal of the United States as a nation out for world domination. Russia, on the other hand, is interested only in peace, they say.

Putin, expected to win the presidency by a comfortable margin, said last week that global affairs had been permeated by a "cult of violence," a reference to U.S. foreign policy.

Makarov said the Russian military is closely watching Iran, Syria and the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. Russia has said it will not allow a repeat in Syria of last year's events in Libya, where NATO helped topple Moammar Gadhafi.

Moscow, one of six powers negotiating with Iran to prove Iran's claims that its nuclear program has no military purpose, has repeatedly said too much pressure is counterproductive.

Russia built Iran's first nuclear power plant, which began operation last year, and has used its ties with Tehran as a lever in relations with the United States.

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