

Putin Defends Syria Stance, But Calls for End to Violence

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Friday accused the West of fueling the Syrian conflict by backing opposition forces, but the Foreign Ministry said it will not protect Syria from military intervention.

Putin called for both Syrian government and opposition forces to pull out of besieged cities to end the bloodshed. He said Western refusal to make that demand of opponents of President Bashar Assad has encouraged them to keep fighting.

While staunchly protecting Assad from United Nations sanctions, Russia has made it clear that it will not be able to stop other countries from launching a military intervention if they try to do it without UN approval.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said Friday that Russia will not provide any kind of military assistance to Syria in such a situation.

Putin refused to speculate on Assad's chance of holding on to power, saying that reforms

in Syria have been long overdue and that it's unclear whether the government and the opposition could find a consensus.

Putin insisted that Russia's opposition to the UN resolution condemning Assad is rooted not in its economic interests but a desire to help end hostilities.

"Instead of encouraging parties to the conflict, it's necessary to force them to sit down for talks and begin political procedures and political reforms that would be acceptable for all participants in the conflict," Putin said.

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