

Putin, Hu Urge Support for Syria Peace Plan

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BEIJING — President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao, urged international support Tuesday for UN envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan for Syria despite calls from Arab and Western states for a tougher response to the bloodshed.

The show of unity from Putin and Hu showed how reluctant they would be to abandon Annan's plan, which they see as the most viable path to peace in Syria. Western and Arab governments blame forces loyal to President Bashar Assad for a massacre of 108 people last month, and many want a tougher response.

Syrian rebels said Monday that they are no longer bound by a UN-backed truce because Assad had failed to observe their Friday deadline to implement the cease-fire.

But the leaders of Russia and China said Annan's efforts should not be abandoned.

"On the Syrian issue, the two heads of state said the international community should continue to support joint Arab League/UN special envoy Annan's mediation efforts and the UN

monitoring mission to promote a political solution to the problem in Syria," Chinese state television reported after a meeting between Hu and Putin in Beijing.

Russia and China, permanent members of the UN Security Council with the power to veto resolutions, have stymied efforts by Western powers to condemn or call for the removal of Assad, whose forces, the UN says, have killed more than 9,000 people in 15 months of bloodshed.

The Syrian issue is following a pattern in which China traditionally joins Russia in opposing Western calls for intervention in crises.

In 2011, both countries accused NATO forces of illegitimately turning a UN-authorized operation to protect civilians in Libya into a broader campaign to oust Moammar Gadhafi.

On Friday, Russia, China and Cuba voted against a resolution passed by the 47-member Human Rights Council in Geneva condemning Syria for the massacre in Houla and calling for a UN investigation to gather evidence for possible criminal prosecution.

After his meeting with Hu, Putin said the two leaders exchanged views on the Middle East, Iran and the Korean peninsula, where North Korea has alarmed the region with rocket launches and a nuclear weapons program.

"Our approaches are close and harmonious, but the most important thing is that we have reached a high level of coordination aimed at maximally effective settlement of international crises," Putin said.

China's Foreign Ministry also said Tuesday that both Beijing and Moscow want the political situation in Syria to be handled in-house.

"Both sides oppose external intervention in Syria and oppose regime change by force," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said. "We believe that ultimately the Syrian issue should be properly addressed through consultation among different parties in Syria."

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