

U.S. Accuses Russia of Sending Syria Helicopters

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Protesters in Nepal calling for Russia to stop supporting the Syrian regime, which has become a global pariah. **Navesh Chitrakar**

WASHINGTON — The United States expressed concern that Russia may be sending Syria attack helicopters, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Russia has lied in claiming that its arms transfers to Syria are unrelated to the conflict.

"We have confronted the Russians about stopping their continued arms shipments to Syria," Clinton said Tuesday in Washington. "They have, from time to time, said that we shouldn't worry, [that] everything they are shipping is unrelated to [the Syrian government's] actions internally. That's patently untrue."

Clinton did not offer any details about the source of her information, saying only: "We are concerned about the latest information we have that there are attack helicopters on the way from Russia to Syria."

She said such a sale "will escalate the conflict quite dramatically."

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters that Clinton was concerned about helicopters now en route to Syria and not about possible past sales of Russian-origin attack helicopters to Syria.

But two sources close to Russia's defense industry told Bloomberg that Russia is only repairing helicopters that had been sold to Syria by the Soviet Union.

Russia has been fixing about 20 Mi-24 choppers that Syrian leader Bashar Assad's father, Hafez, acquired under a contract signed years ago, said one of the sources.

Speaking in Iran on Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov defended the sale of arms to Syria and accused the United States of supplying rebels with weapons to fight against the government.

"We are not violating any international law in performing these contracts," Lavrov said. "They are providing arms and weapons to the Syrian opposition that can be used in fighting against the Damascus government."

Lavrov said Russia's position was based on concern for the Syrian people and the country's integrity rather than personal preference for Assad.

"I have announced time and time again that our stance is not based on support for Bashar Assad or anyone else," he said. "We don't want to see Syria disintegrate."

Pentagon spokesman Captain John Kirby said he had no knowledge of a new helicopter shipment but acknowledged that helicopters are staging attacks.

"We know that the Assad regime is using helicopter gunships against their own people," Kirby said.

Asked whether Russia's provision of military equipment to Syria was enabling the Syrian armed forces to continue the killings, Kirby said: "To the degree that the Syrian armed forces use that resupply to kill their own people, then yes."

(Reuters, Bloomberg)

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