

Syrian Envoy Denies Russia Sending Helicopters

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Mi-17 helicopters in Afghanistan

Syria's ambassador to Moscow said on Thursday that Russia is not supplying Syria's government with attack helicopters, the most specific denial yet from Moscow or Damascus of remarks by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"Russia is not delivering any helicopters to Syria," Ambassador Riad Haddad told Reuters, speaking two days after Clinton said the United States had information that attack helicopters were on the way from Russia to Syria.

Russia has faced increasing Western criticism over arms supplies to Syria, where the United Nations says government forces have killed more than 10,000 people in a crackdown.

Russia says it is fulfilling existing contracts for supplies of air defense systems, for use against external attacks, and is not sending Syria weapons that could be used in the internal conflict.

Haddad echoed those statements, telling a news conference, "These are defensive weapons."

A source close to Russia's weapons export monopoly Rosoboronexport said Wednesday there have been no recent contracts between Russia and Syria for new attack helicopters to Damascus, but that Clinton may have been referring to military helicopters that had been repaired in Russia.

Meanwhile in Washington, the Pentagon notified Congress of plans to purchase more helicopters for the Afghan military from Russian arms dealer Rosoboronexport.

The Pentagon ordered two Mi-17 helicopters earlier this year to replace aircraft that crashed, and it decided in recent days to exercise an option to purchase 10 more helicopters to replace aging Afghan aircraft, a Defense Department spokeswoman said.

Total value of the 12-aircraft sale, including engineering services and spare parts, is \$217.7 million, the Pentagon told Republican Senator John Cornyn.

A member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Cornyn recently called Rosoboronexport "an enabler of mass murder in Syria."

"I remain deeply troubled that the [Pentagon] would knowingly do business with a firm that has enabled mass atrocities," Cornyn wrote in a letter to the Pentagon.

Questioned about Rosoboronexport's arms sales at a news conference Tuesday, Pentagon spokesman Navy Captain John Kirby defended the Defense Department's actions.

"It's not just what you're flying or where it was made, it's what you're doing with it, right?" he said.

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