

Helicopter Shipment Heads Back to Syria

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said he had urged Syria's government to "do a lot more" to implement envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan. **Denis Grishkin**

A ship carrying Russian helicopters to Syria, which turned back after its insurance was cut, is expected to resume its journey accompanied by at least one other vessel, Interfax reported Sunday, citing a military source.

The report is likely to reignite international criticism of Russia's arms deliveries to Syria, which U.S. officials have called reprehensible and the Arab League has said should be stopped.

"A military-diplomatic source in Moscow told Interfax that [the ship] will go from Murmansk to Syria. According to his information, the ship should travel under escort," the news agency reported.

The ship *Alaed*, which entered Murmansk on Sunday to change its flag to the Russian standard, will not be accompanied by military vessels, the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The report did not say how the ship had resolved its insurance problems or what difference

the flag change would make.

The government acknowledged Thursday that it was trying to send repaired combat helicopters — not new equipment — to Syria.

Moscow is one of Syria's main arms suppliers and has shielded its long-standing ally President Bashar al-Assad from tougher UN sanctions over his crackdown on a 16-month revolt.

News of the resumption of the delivery came as Turkey accused Syria on Sunday of shooting down a military plane in international airspace without warning. Russia has sold Syria air defense systems, but Damascus has said the jet was downed by anti-aircraft fire, not missiles.

Moscow has said the shipment was unrelated to the violence inside Syria, something U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed on June 13 as "patently untrue."

The ship's Russian operator, Femco, did not confirm that the ship Alaed was heading back to Syria, but said it would maintain its declared itinerary and travel to Vladivostok. One likely route to Vladivostok would take it close to Syria's Mediterranean coast.

"As a purely commercial organization, Femco can say that the Alaed is carrying out a commercial trip on the basis of a time charter contract with a Russian state company," it said in a statement.

Moscow-based defense analyst Ruslan Aliyev said the Alaed was carrying 12-15 Mi-25 helicopters that were repaired in Kaliningrad and bought by Assad's late father and predecessor, Hafez al-Assad, at the end of the 1980s.

The Alaed first set off from Baltiisk in the Kaliningrad region on June 11.

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