

Russians Dismiss Criticism of 3rd Syria Veto

July 22, 2012



A Syrian honor guard carrying the coffins of members of Assad's inner circle during a funeral Friday in Damascus.

Russia dismissed international criticism of its veto of a UN Security Council resolution on Syria as "absolutely unacceptable" but backed a resolution Friday to renew the 300-member UN observer force in Syria for 30 days.

The Security Council voted shortly after Russia's ambassador to France, Alexander Orlov, said he believes that Syrian President Bashar Assad is ready to step down "in a civilized way."

The Syrian government immediately denied that, and the Russian Foreign Ministry said the ambassador's statements were taken out of context and "wrongly interpreted."

Both Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution Thursday that would have threatened Syrian authorities with sanctions if they do not halt their violent crackdown on the 16-month-old revolution.

Western nations condemned the vetoes.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich rejected the criticism, saying the draft resolution placed unrealistic demands on the government while putting little or no pressure on its opponents.

"Instead of making crude insinuations about Russian policy ... our Western partners should at least do something to encourage the militant opposition to step onto the path of a political settlement," Lukashevich said at a weekly briefing.

The veto was the third time Russia and China have blocked Western efforts to increase pressure on Assad.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, said after the veto that the United States would "intensify [its] work with a diverse range of partners outside the Security Council to bring pressure to bear on the Assad regime" and deliver aid.

Lukashevich responded to Rice's statement.

"If such declarations and such plans are elements of actual policy, I think that is a very, very alarming signal to all of us about how the international community plans to respond to international conflict situations," he said.

President Vladimir Putin issued a similar warning after a meeting of his Security Council that included a detailed discussion of Syria, his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said.

Putin believes that "any attempts to bypass the UN Security Council will be ineffective and undermine the authority of this international organization," Peskov said.

But Russia joined the other Security Council members in unanimously approving the resolution Friday to renew a force of unarmed observers sent to Syria three months ago to monitor a cease-fire that never happened.

The mandate of the observer force had been set to expire Friday.

Russia's UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, had said he would veto the original British-drafted resolution on the observer mission and support a rival Pakistani text that would have extended the mission for 45 days, with the possibility of further renewals.

But after closed-door consultations called by Pakistan, all 15 council members reached agreement on a revised British text.

Meanwhile, seemingly contradictory reports over Assad's intentions fueled a debate over his future that had already intensified after last week's daring attack in Damascus, which killed four people close to him.

The victims included his powerful brother-in-law and deputy defense minister, and his defense minister.

Orlov, the Russian ambassador in Paris, said in an interview with Radio France Internationale

that Assad's acceptance of an international agreement in June for a transition toward a more democratic regime and his subsequent nomination of a representative to negotiate the transition meant he was prepared to give up leadership.

"Personally ... I think it will be difficult for him to stay in office, given everything that's happened," Orlov told RFI.

He later backtracked in an interview with BFM TV, saying in response to a question that he did not think Assad's days are numbered.

"I say it's for Syrian people to determine that. ... Is the regime coming to an end or not? It's not for me to say," Orlov said.

The ambassador blamed the confusion on the fact that he was misunderstood.

"If President Assad accepted this [agreement] that foresees a transition, it means that perhaps within himself he is ready to leave if that was the result of the negotiations. It's because of this that I called it a civilized departure," he told BFM.

Orlov noted in the RFI interview that Assad had accepted the final statement of a June 30 Geneva agreement for a transition "to a more democratic regime" and had then gone the next step, naming a representative to negotiate the transition with the opposition.

In essence, that meant that "he had agreed to leave, but leave in a civilized way," the ambassador said.

Syrian TV quickly said the interview had been taken out of context.

Russian Embassy spokesman Sergei Parinov said the ambassador's statement was "incorrectly interpreted" by international media.

Parinov said the ambassador just "restated" Russia's interpretation of Assad's response to the Geneva agreement.

(Reuters, AP)

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