

Putin Sticks to Stance on Syria Crisis

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SOCHI, Krasnodar Region — President Vladimir Putin said Monday that Syria's crisis must be resolved through negotiations, not force, and warned that if President Bashar Assad's government was toppled a civil war could continue with roles reversed.

After talks with Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, Putin said last week's vote to extend an observer mission showed that compromise could be found at the United Nations but gave no sign that Russia would drop its opposition to sanctions or intervention.

"We think that the future of a country should not be decided on the basis of military victory or defeat of one of the sides, but through a negotiation process, on the basis of compromise and agreements reached," Putin said.

"The current Syrian leadership and the armed opposition must find in themselves the strength to organize a negotiation process," Putin told a joint news conference after the meeting in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi. "In the course of the talks [they need to] decide how their country will live in the future."

But he stood firm on Russia's insistence that Assad's exit from power could not be

a precondition for such a process, and said the overthrow of the government would only bring more bloodshed.

"We fear that if the current leadership is removed from power unconstitutionally, the opposition and the current leadership may simply trade places," Putin said, adding that in that case "nobody knows how long civil war would continue."

Putin suggested that "structural changes" in government should come only after fighting stops and talks are held to determine how the country should be run in the future. "Doing it the other way around would be chaos," he said.

Reflecting a persistent rift over 16 months of bloodshed in Syria, Monti said he urged Moscow, which has vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions that would have increased pressure on Assad, to help seek new ways to solve the problem.

He said Italy understood Russia's concern over any Security Council resolution that could allow for military intervention, but suggested the lack of tough action by global powers could be more dangerous.

"I understand Russia's concern over possible repetition of a negative experience," Monti said in an apparent reference to a 2010 resolution allowing an air campaign in Libya, which Russia says NATO turned into a mandate to oust Moammar Gadhafi.

"But at the same time we need to take into account the risk ... that if the United Nations does not take certain action, the situation could go out of control," he said through an interpreter.

Monti, citing Lebanon as an example, said the best solution might be the formation of a broadly representative transitional government but that "adopting such decision would be impossible without Russia's support."

Aeroflot said Monday that it would stop its flights between Moscow and the Syrian capital, Damascus, as of Aug. 6 because of low demand.

The airline operates two flights from Moscow and two from Damascus each week.

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