

Russia Says UN Should Stay in Syria

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A government checkpoint in the Syrian capital of Damascus in January of this year.

Russia told the United States on Thursday that it favors a continued United Nations presence in Syria, warning that a UN exit from the Middle Eastern country would have "serious negative consequences."

Moscow and Washington are divided over how best to help end the bloodshed in Syria, where opponents of President Bashar Assad say some 18,000 people have been killed since an uprising began in March 2011.

The United States has said that unarmed UN observers should not remain in Syria beyond an Aug. 19 deadline but that it is willing to consider an alternative UN presence in the country.

But in a meeting with U.S. Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman, Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov emphasized "the need to maintain the UN presence in Syria," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Gatilov "underscored that the exit of the United Nations from Syria in the current situation would have serious negative consequences not only for the country, but for the whole region,"

it said. The statement made no specific mention of observers.

In April, the UN Security Council approved the deployment of 300 monitors to observe a failed cease-fire as part of a UN-backed peace plan, but Russia and China have vetoed three other resolutions criticizing Damascus and threatening sanctions.

The number of observers was halved last month when the Security Council renewed the mission for 30 days.

The U.S. envoy to the United Nations, Susan Rice, said last week that there was no point in renewing the monitors' mandate again because there was no cease-fire for them to observe.

Meanwhile, in an interview published Thursday, a Syrian government envoy praised China and Russia on their stance toward the conflict. The envoy made the comment while on a visit to Beijing that she said would give officials a "real picture" of the crisis.

Envoy Bouthaina Shaaban's interview with the state-run China Daily was the first public comment from her trip to Beijing, where she arrived Tuesday, and she sought to cast China as a steadfast friend of Assad's government.

"We're happy to see countries like China and Russia, who are not colonizers or [who don't] deal with people as colonizers," Shaaban told the English-language newspaper, adding that this is "a very different stance from the West."

She said her visit would give "the Chinese leadership a real picture of what's going on in Syria."

In a separate interview with the popular Chinese-language tabloid the Global Times, Shaaban said she hoped Syria's friends in Russia, Iran and China could "help find a solution" to the crisis.

On Wednesday, Russia accused the West of reneging on an agreement to establish a transitional government in Syria and of prolonging the bloodshed by encouraging the rebels fighting to topple Assad.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said an agreement made by world powers and former peace envoy Kofi Annan in Geneva on June 30 was still valid, and he urged the West to do more to put it into practice.

"We remain convinced that what was achieved in Geneva should not be sabotaged. We will be demanding in the next few days a clear answer from our partners on whether they confirm what they signed in Geneva," Lavrov said at a news conference.

"And if so, then why don't they take any measures to execute that plan?" he said in the Belarussian capital, Minsk.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the United States agreed with Lavrov's comments that the spirit of the Geneva declaration should "stay alive."

"We agree with that, which is precisely why the last time we went to the UN Security Council in June, our effort was to try to get a UN Security Council resolution that endorsed the Geneva understandings about transition, but put real teeth into a resolution in the form of sanctions if Assad didn't start moving in that direction," she said. "And it was the Russians and the Chinese who chose to veto that."

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