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Russia Sees Limited Arms Sales to Libya

By The Moscow Times

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UNITED NATIONS — Russia is prepared to consider ways to make it easier for Libya to buy arms, but it voiced serious concern about lifting an embargo on the country, Russia's UN ambassador said.

Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan said last week that he planned to ask the UN Security Council to lift the embargo, which was imposed at the start of an uprising in 2011 that culminated in the ouster of dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

Russia's UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, who is president of the Security Council this month, said Monday that there were concerns about Libya's lack of internal authority and the spread of weapons across its borders.

He said Libya had not yet officially requested that the arms embargo be lifted but said the issue would likely be discussed by the 15-member council before a meeting on Libya later this month.

"Some council members do have reservations about lifting the arms embargo," Churkin told reporters, noting that Libya's government was already able to purchase weapons with the approval of a Security Council sanctions committee.

"Of course, it can be regarded as a somewhat cumbersome procedure even though it's supposed to happen rather quickly," Churkin said. "I think we will also be looking at ways maybe to facilitate the possible acquisition of arms by the Libyan government short of full-fledged lifting of the arms embargo."

The Libyan government has struggled to exert authority. State security forces remain weak, and militias made up of former rebel fighters hold power on the ground.

Libya's official LANA news agency quoted army chief of staff Yussef al-Mangoush as saying last week that Libya was planning to rebuild its army and wanted to sign contracts to help achieve this goal and assess what kind of equipment it needed in the future.

Libya's south has become a smuggling route for weapons, which have reached al-Qaida militants deep in the Sahara Desert. The lawless region is also a conduit for contraband.

In the eastern city of Benghazi, the cradle of the revolt against Gadhafi, there has been a wave of violence against diplomats, military and police, including an attack on Sept. 11 that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans.

"It does give one pause, and I think it suggests a need to reflect very carefully on the advisability of lifting the arms embargo," Churkin said.

Russia is still bristling that its abstention from a UN vote in 2011 allowed NATO airstrikes to help Libyan rebels trying to topple Gadhafi.

Russian officials accused the United States and its allies of overstepping their mandate.

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