

Amid Rare Unity, UN Security Council Mulls Action on Syria Aid

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A group of kids walking through damaged streets on their way to school in the Duma neighborhood in Damascus. **Yousef Albostany**

UNITED NATIONS — After adopting a hard-fought, Russian-backed resolution to rid Syria of chemical weapons, the United Nations Security Council is now turning its attention to the country's dire humanitarian crisis, putting to the test its fragile consensus on the conflict.

The Security Council is considering a statement to try to boost aid access in Syria by urging Syrian authorities to allow cross-border deliveries from neighboring countries and asking parties to the conflict to hold humanitarian pauses in the fighting.

More than 2 million Syrians, mostly women and children, have fled during the 2-1/2-year-old civil war, which the UN says has killed more than 100,000 people. Millions more inside Syria are in desperate need of help, but aid has slowed to a trickle due to excessive red tape and violence.

The council has been discussing how to respond to the Syrian aid crisis for months. Western members recently decided to pursue a statement on the issue rather than a resolution to avoid a likely showdown with Russia and China, diplomats said.

Russia, a close ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, and China have vetoed three Security Council resolutions since October 2011 that would have condemned Assad's government and threatened it with sanctions.

After weeks of intense diplomacy between the U.S. and Russia, the council Friday reached a rare agreement on a resolution that demands the eradication of Syria's chemical arms but does not threaten automatic punitive action against Assad's government if it does not comply.

The draft aid text is based on a wish list that UN aid chief Valerie Amos sent the council last month that included allowing cross-border delivery, humanitarian pauses in fighting and advance notice of military offensives. Diplomats described the list as ambitious.

The draft statement urges the Syrian authorities to promptly facilitate "safe and unhindered humanitarian access to people in need through the most effective ways, including across conflict lines and, where appropriate, across borders from neighboring countries in accordance with the UN guiding principles of humanitarian emergency assistance."

While diplomats said there has so far been "constructive engagement" by Russia on an aid statement, others warned that Moscow was unlikely to back a council declaration urging Assad's government to allow the delivery of assistance across borders.

Russian UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin said earlier this month that he was "very encouraging" of a council statement on the aid crisis, but he has also stated that Moscow would only support a push for cross-border access if agreed to by Syria.

Only 12 international aid groups are approved by the Syrian government to work in the country and convoys of aid trucks struggle to meet demand, delayed by having to negotiate dozens of government and opposition checkpoints, UN officials say.

Deputy UN council envoys are due to meet to discuss the proposed Security Council presidential statement Monday, said diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity. Unlike a resolution, a presidential statement is not legally binding.

The draft text urges all parties to "agree on the modalities to implement humanitarian pauses, as well as key routes to enable promptly — upon notification from relief agencies — the safe and unhindered passage of humanitarian convoys along these routes."

After the Security Council unanimously passed the resolution on Syria's chemical arsenal Friday, Australian U.N. Ambassador Gary Quinlan appealed for members to quickly take action on the "ever-accelerating humanitarian catastrophe" in Syria.

"Each day we delay creates another 6,000 refugees," said Quinlan, who is president of the Security Council for September. He called for the council to try to reach agreement on a statement this week.

Diplomats say Assad's government is opposed to cross-border access over concerns that

weapons could be smuggled more easily to opposition forces. Some aid agencies are already operating across borders in rebel-controlled areas, diplomats said.

The Security Council did reach agreement in April on an informal statement on the humanitarian situation in Syria after Amos gave a bleak assessment of the situation. The UN now says half of Syria's 20 million people need help.

Without specifically pointing a finger at either side of the conflict, that statement broadly "underlined the need to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance through the most effective ways, including where appropriate across borders in accordance with guiding principles of humanitarian assistance."

Europe's aid chief, Kristalina Georgieva, on Wednesday welcomed the prospect of a Security Council statement, but said: "We are not giving up on the Security Council at some point coming up with a binding resolution on humanitarian access."

British Foreign Minister William Hague said Friday, "it would be stronger and more effective, of course, to have a resolution, as we have done on chemical weapons," but in the absence of that, he hoped a statement could be approved.

Human Rights Watch U.N. Director Philippe Bolopion said that while a presidential statement was weaker than a resolution, it would be a positive step by the council to make clear that it would not tolerate the denial of lifesaving aid.

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