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Al Jazeera

Russia and China Veto UN Resolution on Syria

Second double veto of Syria resolution draws condemnation from rights groups and US envoy who calls it "unforgivable".

2/4/2012

Russia and China have vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian government's deadly crackdown on protests for the second time.

Thirteen countries on Saturday voted for the resolution proposed by European and Arab nations to give strong backing to the Arab League's plan to end the violence in Syria that has claimed thousands of lives across the country since March 2011.

But Russia and China made a repeat of their rare double veto that blocked an earlier draft resolution on October 5.

Vitaly Churkin, the Russian ambassador to the UN, said the veto of the new resolution was necessary because it "sent an unbalanced signal to the Syrian parties".

Churkin said Western nations behind the resolution were "calling for regime change, pushing the opposition towards power".

Li Baodong, the Chinese representative to the UN, said further consultation was needed before the council denounced the Syrian government.

"To push through a vote when parties are still seriously divided over the issue will not help maintain the unity and authority of the Security Council, or help resolve the issue," Li said.

The veto was immediately condemned by New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) as "diplomatic cover" for the Syrian government.

In a statement, the rights group said: "Vetoes by Russia and China are not only a slap in the face of the Arab League, they are also a betrayal of the Syrian people."

The HRW statement continued: "The death toll had more than doubled in the last four months, and the risk is high that the Assad regime will see this double veto as a green light for even more violence."

Strong warning

Susan Rice, the US envoy to the UN, called the double veto "unforgivable".

"Since these two members last vetoed the resolution, an estimated 3,000 Syrians have been killed, with nearly 250 killed just yesterday. Many thousands more have been held and tortured," Rice said, adding; "Once again, the courageous people of Syria can see which members of the council support their fight and which do not."

The UN has reported that more than 5,400 people have been killed since anti-Assad protests erupted in March 2011.

Rice concluded with a direct warning to Moscow and Beijing that "any further bloodshed will be on their hands".

Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, said the double veto "is a great disappointment to the people of Syria and the Middle East and to all supporters of democracy and human rights".

"It undermines the role of the United Nations and the international community in this period when the Syrian authorities must hear a unified voice calling for an immediate end to its violence against the Syrian people," he said in a statement.

Moscow, a strong ally of the Syrian government, had earlier signaled it would veto any call for President Bashar al-Assad's removal.

The diplomatic developments come with activists reporting on Saturday that a Syrian army assault on Homs had killed more than 200 civilians since Friday night.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights cited witnesses saying 217 people had been killed in Homs, 138 of them in the Khaldiye neighbourhood.

The opposition Syrian National Council decried Saturday's violence as a "horrific massacre".

"The Syrian National Council calls on everyone around the world to speak up and do something to stop the bloodshed of innocent Syrians," it said in a statement.

The Local Co-ordination Committees, an opposition activist network, said more than 500 additional people were injured after the army used tanks, mortars and machine guns in the assault on the opposition stronghold.

Al Jazeera's Maysa Khalaf, reporting from Beirut, said sources in Syria told her the bombardment of the area started after the opposition Free Syrian Army, a group of army defectors, attacked Syrian army checkpoints and killed about 10 soldiers.

"I've been told that the main public hospital is completely overwhelmed and people have set up makeshift clinics in mosques. They are running low on supplies of blood," she said. "Several buildings have been destroyed."

The Syrian government denied the assault, saying the reports were part of a "hysterical campaign" of incitement by armed groups against Syria.

Embassies attacked

Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister, had said earlier on Saturday that Moscow had objections to what he termed "the imposition of the terms and conditions of the dialogue, which must be started without prejudging the results".

He also said that "measures must be taken to influence not only the government ... but also the armed groups, because unless you do it both ways, you are taking sides in a civil war".

Moscow has been a strategic partner of Syria through its decades under the Assad family and a major arms supplier to Damascus, and so bristles at outsiders trying to dictate political change in Damascus.

Rafeeq Abdel Salaam, Tunisia's foreign minister, announced on Saturday that his government had started the procedure for expelling the Syrian ambassador from Tunis.

The reports of violence in Homs has prompted demonstrators to storm five Syrian embassies in Europe and the Middle East.

In Europe, protesters forced their way into the Syrian embassies in **London** on Saturday, prompting arrests and causing minor damage.

In Athens, police said 13 people were detained after breaking into the Syrian Embassy before dawn. In Germany, 20 people forced their way into Syria's embassy in Berlin on Friday and damaged offices there, police said.

Syrian protesters in Cairo set part of the embassy on fire on Friday night, while protesters in Kuwait broke windows at the embassy and hoisted the Syrian independence flag used by the opposition. The Kuwait news agency said a number of security personnel were hurt in scuffles.