

Russia and China Block U.N. Action on Crisis in Syria
By Neil MacFarquhar and Anthony Shadid, The New York Times
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UNITED NATIONS — A United Nations Security Council effort to end the violence in Syria collapsed in acrimony with a double veto by Russia and China on Saturday, hours after the Syrian military attacked the city of Homs in what opposition leaders described as the deadliest government assault in the nearly 11-month uprising.

The veto and the mounting violence underlined the dynamics shaping what is proving to be the Arab world's bloodiest revolt: diplomatic stalemate and failure as Syria plunges deeper into what many are already calling a civil war. Diplomats have lamented their lack of options in pressuring the Syrian government, and even some Syrian dissidents worry about what the growing confrontation will mean for a country reeling from bloodshed and hardship.

The veto is almost sure to embolden the government of President Bashar al-Assad, which brazenly carried out the assault on Homs on the day that the Security Council had planned to vote. It came, too, around the anniversary of its crackdown in 1982 on another Syrian city, Hama, by Mr. Assad's father, Hafez, in which at least 10,000 people were killed in one of the bloodiest episodes in modern Arab history.

"It's quite clear — this is a license to do more of the same and worse," said Peter Harling, an expert on Syria at the International Crisis Group. "The regime will take it for granted that it can escalate further. We're entering a new phase that will be far more violent still than what we've seen now."

The Security Council voted 13 to 2 in favor of a resolution backing an Arab League peace plan for Syria, but passage was blocked by Russia and China, which opposed what they saw as a potential violation of Syria's sovereignty. The support of those countries has proved crucial in bolstering the Syrian government's confidence, despite an isolation more pronounced than any time since the Assad family seized power more than four decades ago.

After the vote, and the failure before that of the Arab League peace plan to stem the violence, predictions were grim about what is ahead in a conflict that the United Nations says has claimed more than 5,000 lives. To many, two inexorable forces were at work: a government bent on crushing the uprising by force and an opposition that, if not increasing in numbers, appeared to be growing even more determined.

"What more do we need to know to act decisively in the Security Council?" Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton fumed at a news conference in Munich. "To block this resolution is to bear responsibility for the horrors that are occurring on the ground in Syria."

Responding to the Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, who asked, "What's the endgame?" Mrs. Clinton replied: "The endgame in the absence of us acting together as the international community, I fear, is civil war."

The attack in Homs, where Syrian opposition leaders said more than 200 people were killed, drew outrage from around the world and intensified pressure on the Security Council to act.

President Obama condemned what he called "the Syrian government's unspeakable assault against the people of Homs," saying in a statement that Mr. Assad "has no right to lead Syria, and has lost all legitimacy with his people and the international community." He accused Syria of having "murdered hundreds of Syrian citizens, including women and children."

The French foreign minister, Alain Juppé, said, "The massacre in Homs is a crime against humanity, and those responsible will have to answer for it."

Protests broke out at Syrian Embassies around the world, including in Egypt, Germany, Greece and Kuwait, and Tunisia expelled Syria's ambassador.

But at the United Nations, Russia, Syria's staunch ally, had promised to veto any resolution that could open the way to foreign military intervention or insist on Mr. Assad's removal.

The resolution on Saturday said the Security Council "fully supported" the Arab League plan, which calls for Mr. Assad to cede power to his vice president and a unity government to lead Syria to democratic elections.

In an effort to placate Russia and other skeptics, Arab and Western ambassadors had dropped specific references in the resolution to Mr. Assad's ceding power and for calls of a voluntary arms embargo and sanctions, and added language barring outside military intervention.

Mr. Lavrov said Saturday that Moscow still had two objections: that the resolution did not place sufficient blame for the violence on the opposition, and that it unrealistically demanded that the government withdraw its military forces to their barracks.

He told a security conference in Munich that adopting the current resolution would risk "taking sides in a civil war." In a television interview quoted by the Itar-Tass news agency, he said that ignoring Russia's objections would result in "another scandal."

But Security Council members, citing the killings in Homs, pointedly disagreed. "The scandal is not to act," said Peter Wittig, the German ambassador to the United Nations. "The scandal would be failure to act."

The resolution's Western and Arab sponsors said they had compromised enough, and pushed the measure to a vote, virtually daring Russia to exercise its veto and risk international condemnation for failing to stop the killings in Syria.

In the end, both Russia and China said they vetoed the measure because it unfairly blamed only the Syrian government for the violence. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin of Russia called it an "unbalanced message," while the Chinese envoy, Li Baodong, said the resolution, in trying to predetermine the outcome of dialogue between the government and the opposition, "might further complicate the situation."

The United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, who rarely weighs in on Security Council decisions, called the vote "a great disappointment."

"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.

He said the vote made it "even more urgent" for the international community to seek a Syrian-led political transition to a democratic system.

In fact, diplomatic efforts were continuing outside of the Security Council.

Mr. Churkin said Russia would try to solve the problem itself. Mr. Lavrov was expected to go to Damascus for talks with Mr. Assad on Tuesday.

"The Security Council is not the only diplomatic tool on the planet," Mr. Churkin said.

In Paris, President Nicolas Sarkozy said France was consulting with its European and Arab partners to create a “group of friends of the Syrian people” to support the Arab League plan. “France is not giving up,” he said.

Susan E. Rice, the American ambassador, said the United States would explore ways with its allies to continue to “ratchet up the pressure” on Damascus, including further sanctions.

The attack in Homs, a city in central Syria that has emerged as the center of the uprising, began Friday night after Syrian Army defectors attacked two military checkpoints and captured soldiers there, activists said. One activist put the number of abducted soldiers at 13, another at 19. They suggested that enraged commanders then ordered the assault, which lasted from about 9 p.m. on Friday to 1 a.m. on Saturday, focusing on the neighborhood of Khaldiya. Five other neighborhoods were also assaulted.

There were contradictory reports about casualties. Homs has been largely inaccessible to journalists and difficult to reach by phone.

The Syrian National Council, which has sought to act as an umbrella group for the opposition, said that more than 260 people had been killed. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the toll was 217. Both groups, along with other activists, said hundreds were wounded.

One opposition activist said the Syrian military suffered casualties, too.

Videos smuggled out of the city and reports by opposition activists described a harrowing barrage of mortar shells and gunfire that left hundreds more wounded in the city.

“It’s a real massacre in every sense of the word,” said a resident of Khaldiya who gave his name as Abu Jihad. “I saw bodies of women and children lying on roads, beheaded. It’s horrible and inhuman. It was a long night helping people get to hospitals.”

At one point, a resident said, people left the top floors of apartment buildings, fearful that shelling they described as random would wreck their homes. Another resident, reached by phone on Saturday, said that people had huddled in the dark, without water and electricity, and that checkpoints had proliferated around neighborhoods.

“After this, no one in the world can blame us for fighting, even if we have to use kitchen knives,” said a 40-year-old Homs resident who gave his name as Abu Omar.

The Syrian government accused the news media and activists of exaggerating the toll. A report by the Syrian state news agency, SANA, complained of “frenetic media campaigns against Syria disseminating false information about Syrian Army shelling of civilians.”

The agency declared that “life is normal in the Damascus countryside, Hama and Homs.”

Syria took a similar view of the attacks on its missions in the Middle East and Europe. As many as 100 demonstrators stormed the Syrian Embassy in Cairo at 3 a.m. Saturday, tearing its iron gate off its hinges, burning parts of the first floor and demolishing much of the ambassador’s office. By daybreak, the floors were littered with broken glass, furniture that had been torn apart or burned, and what remained of the office equipment.

It was the second time in two weeks that protesters had breached the embassy.

Ammar Arsan, the embassy’s media counselor, said he saw no connection between the events in Homs and what he called “the terrorist attack” on the Cairo mission. “The Syrian Army is

conducting an operation against terrorist groups in Hama and Homs,” he said. “This is a crime. Nothing in the whole world justifies this.”

The simultaneous attacks on Syrian Embassies in Germany, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt and elsewhere, he said, were evidence of coordination by Syria’s enemies.

Neil MacFarquhar reported from the United Nations, and Anthony Shadid from Beirut, Lebanon. Reporting was contributed by Nada Bakri and Hwaida Saad from Beirut, David D. Kirkpatrick from Cairo, Steven Erlanger from Munich, and Michael Schwartz from Moscow.

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