

Syrian security forces tortured children, rights group says
By the CNN Wire Staff
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Syrian army and security officers detained and tortured children with impunity during the past year, a rights group said in a report Friday, as it urged the United Nations to take action.

The Human Rights Watch report comes as the U.N. Security Council considers a draft resolution intended to pressure Syria to end its months-long crackdown on anti-government demonstrators - and as violence continues unabated in Syria.

At least 28 people were killed across Syria on Friday, including three children and three defected soldiers, according to the Local Coordination Committees of Syria, a network of opposition activists.

A Security Council meeting ended Thursday evening without agreement on the text of the draft, according to U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice.

However, Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, told reporters that the draft resolution had been agreed upon and would be sent to the governments of Security Council members for consultation, according to Russia's state-run news agency RIA Novosti.

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"We have the text which we shall send to our capital cities and will wait for the result," Churkin said.

Human Rights Watch urged the Security Council "to demand that the Syrian government end all human rights violations."

Syria must also be made to cooperate with monitoring teams sent by the Arab League and the U.N. Human Rights Council, the global monitor said.

"Children have not been spared the horror of Syria's crackdown. Syrian security forces have killed, arrested, and tortured children in their homes, their schools, or on the streets," said Lois Whitman, children's rights director at Human Rights Watch.

"In many cases, security forces have targeted children just as they have targeted adults."

The organization said it has documented at least 12 cases of children detained under inhumane conditions and tortured, as well as children shot while in their homes or on the street.

"Human Rights Watch has also documented government use of schools as detention centers, military bases or barracks, and sniper posts, as well as the arrest of children from schools," a statement from the group says.

The draft of the resolution discussed Thursday had dropped demands from an Arab League plan for Syria to form a unity government and for President Bashar al-Assad to delegate power to his deputy.

"We had what I would characterize as sometimes difficult but ultimately useful discussions," Rice told reporters. "We're still working. This is not done."

She said the Moroccans, who submitted the original draft, would come back with another version that could be voted on. "In any case, there are some still complicated issues that our capitals will have to deliberate on and provide each of us with instructions on."

Pakistan's U.N. ambassador, Abdullah Hussain Haroon, insisted Thursday evening that council members "are two words" apart on agreeing on the text.

Before the talks, Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby said that even a watered-down resolution would pressure the Syrian government.

U.N. diplomats said the changes reflected a big concession to Russia, which has been reluctant to sign on to any plan that could be seen as a mandate for regime change in Damascus, as occurred in Libya after it signed a resolution calling for a no-fly zone.

Russia, which has said it is concerned about the prospect of a Syrian civil war and does not want al-Assad pushed from power, has made clear it will not accept an arms embargo or economic sanctions.

A call for other nations to follow the Arab League members in adopting measures such as sanctions against Syria had also been dropped from the latest version of the draft resolution.

French Ambassador Gerard Araud had said he hoped to have the text finalized by the end of Thursday and suggested that a vote could happen as soon as Friday, or Monday if necessary. Other diplomats suggested that a vote over the weekend was possible.

U.S. and European diplomats insisted that the revised text still fully endorsed the Arab League plan and that it did not need to spell out every detail to have the same meaning.

"It will still put pressure on the Syrian government, because they realize that Russia cannot stand up forever. And they are under great pressure now. And, you know, Russia does not want to be against the people," Elaraby said.

Asked why Libya was seen as a case for international intervention because of the threat of a massacre, whereas Syria has seen thousands of deaths but no intervention, Elaraby cited the situation on the ground, the geopolitical location of Syria, the fact it has a strong, regular army -- "and, maybe, there is no oil in Syria."

The economic element could be a factor, he suggested, especially in a year when the United States and France are holding presidential elections and when Europe is in the grip of a debt crisis.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Thursday: "This is not Libya, the situation is different, what we are looking to do is to support the plan of the Arab League, which is quite clear on how a peaceful Syrian lead transition could go forward."

At least 7,100 people, including 461 children, have died since the start of the Syrian uprising in March, according to the Local Coordination Committees.

The United Nations estimated in December that more than 5,000 people have died since March. But the global body has not been able to update that figure because of the insecurity.

CNN cannot independently confirm opposition or government reports from Syria because access to the country is limited.

(CNN's Richard Roth, Mick Krever, Elise Labott and Salma Abdelaziz contributed to this report.)

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