

Russia Opposes a Humanitarian Resolution on Syria

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Russia said Wednesday it opposes a new U.N. Security Council resolution on the humanitarian plight in Syria, an announcement that is likely to torpedo a Western and Arab-backed draft that would pressure the government and opposition to allow desperately needed aid into the country.

Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin told a press briefing that "hard, pragmatic and purposeful work is necessary" to resolve specific humanitarian issues — not a council resolution which will almost certainly aim "to politicize the problem."

Council diplomats said they expect to circulate a draft humanitarian resolution this week, following the failure of peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition to achieve any concrete results, especially on possible humanitarian aid convoys to besieged parts of the city of Homs.

"We are against moving to a resolution now in the Security Council," Churkin told reporters at Russia's U.N. Mission. "We believe that it's a wrong move. It's not a good time to have any resolution discussed in the Security Council."

Russia and China, which support the Syrian government, have vetoed three previous Western-backed resolutions that would have pressured President Bashar Assad to end the violence. The deeply divided council did come together in October to approve a weaker presidential statement appealing for immediate access to all areas of the country to deliver aid to millions of civilians.

But Churkin made clear Wednesday that Moscow is not prepared to go

further, saying what is needed is for both sides — and countries with influence on them — to address and resolve specific humanitarian situations.

He said the latest information he saw on Tuesday was that an agreement on who would be allowed to leave Homs, and when and how humanitarian assistance would be supplied to the city, "is about to happen."

Churkin called the first meeting between the government and opposition in Geneva "a good start of talks" after three years of bloody civil war that has killed more than 130,000 people, according to activists.

The talks are supposed to focus on implementing a plan adopted in Geneva in June 2012 calling for the establishment of a transitional governing body in Syria vested with full executive powers. But the Syrian government has rejected a transitional government and has pressed for the talks to focus on the terrorist threat in the country.

Churkin said terrorists "are to a large extent behind this tragic humanitarian situation" and fighting terrorism "should be one of the priorities in the discussions in Geneva."

But he said both sides also need to discuss what happens in the future, including elections and how to form a transitional body.

Churkin said Ahmad al-Jarba, head of the opposition delegation, held four hours of talks in Moscow Tuesday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Al-Jarba assured the Russians "that they mean business, so we hope that is going to transpire during the second round of talks" scheduled to start on Feb. 10.

"But this is definitely something which requires a lot of patience and perserverance," Churkin said.

He said Al-Jarba told Lavrov the opposition delegation needs to be more

representative.

"The more the opposition delegation is representative, the easier and more productive those discussions are going to be," Churkin said.

On other issues, Churkin said that despite the Syrian government's failure to meet another deadline Wednesday for destroying its chemical weapons, "we are confident that the project ultimately is going to be accomplished in a timely manner."

He noted that the American vessel on which the most dangerous chemicals are to be destroyed hasn't arrived in the Mediterranean yet, so if Syria had met its deadline the chemicals would have been languishing on Danish and Norwegian ships "maybe causing a lot of nervousness in some Mediterranean countries.

Churkin also said "nobody can be confident" that Syria and neighboring Lebanon will not disintegrate or fall apart. This would have "very dramatic consequences" and destabilize the region, he said, but one thing all Security Council members support is the territorial integrity of both countries.