International Pressure Builds on Syria, Russia Over Aleppo

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The international community Thursday stepped up pressure on Syria and its allies to end the bombing of eastern Aleppo and allow aid workers in and civilians out of the besieged city.

At an informal meeting of the U.N. General Assembly called by Canada with the support of 70 countries, many members urged the rare use of a mechanism that allows the assembly to convene an “emergency special session” when the Security Council is deadlocked and unable to act to maintain international peace and security.

“We must reassure our citizens — those all around the world who are very concerned about our inability to put an end to the tragedy in Syria,” Canada’s Foreign Minister Stephane Dion said. “We must also be ready to use the tools at our disposal to apply pressure: a resolution or an emergency special session of the U.N. General Assembly are such options.”

The council has been divided for more than five years on what to do about the Syrian conflict. On October 8, Russia exercised its council veto for a fifth time on the subject, rejecting a European resolution to implement a cessation of hostilities and stop all military flights over eastern Aleppo.

Only the Syrian government and its close ally Russia have warplanes in the air over the northern city.

A unilateral Syrian and Russian 11-hour pause of the bombing began Thursday over eastern Aleppo.

Russia has announced a 24-hour extension, and the U.N. said it is seeking an extension at least through Monday so it can evacuate the sick and injured and get food and medical supplies into the city, which has been encircled by the Syrian military since July 7.

“You may hear Russia claim credit for briefly pausing its aerial assault on eastern Aleppo,” U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power told the meeting. “But it is not and must never become praiseworthy to refrain from committing atrocities.”

The U.N. says it needs fighting to stop for a minimum of 48 hours each week in order to safely get humanitarian aid convoys in and evacuate the critically ill and injured.

Briefing the assembly by video link from Stockholm, U.N. Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura said the violence must stop.

“We must save Aleppo now,” de Mistura said. “We must get a cessation of hostilities — the alternative is too awful to contemplate.”

He said if the cessation of hostilities fails, then General Assembly action will be warranted.

“Let’s hope that the cessation of hostilities takes place; let’s hope that the bombing continues to be stopped on both sides,” de Mistura said. “If it does not, I think it would be time for a special session of the General Assembly if the Security Council doesn’t have the capacity of unifying themselves in stopping this horror.”

Under the mechanism, the U.N. General Assembly can step in when the Security Council cannot perform its job and make recommendations to members for collective action, including the use of armed forces to maintain or restore international peace and security. A majority of the 193-member states would have to call for the special session for it to be convened.