

UN suspends Syria mission amid escalating civil war

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The United Nations suspended patrols by its 300 observers in Syria on Saturday in the face of escalating combat between government troops and Western-backed “rebels.”

Maj. Gen. Robert Mood, the Norwegian commander of the roughly 300 unarmed observers, said that the group’s missions were being suspended because the monitors’ own safety was impossible to guarantee, given the stepped-up fighting.

Mood made it clear that the observers would remain in Damascus, re-evaluating the conditions on a daily basis, and on Sunday, a team of observers traveled to the city of Homs in an attempt to negotiate the evacuation of civilians trapped in the fighting. Nonetheless, the US and its major NATO allies have rushed to proclaim the suspension of patrols as the definitive failure of the observer mission, requiring the employment of more aggressive means to achieve regime change in Syria.

The US ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, described the monitors at a closed-door session of the Security Council as “300 sitting ducks in a shooting gallery, one IED away from a disaster,” according to a diplomat quoted by the *Washington Post*.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague echoed the US position, declaring that the suspension of the patrols “underlines the extent of the deterioration of security and stability in Syria, and calls into serious question the viability of the UN Mission.” Hague added that the UN Security Council would consider “its options” after a report by Gen. Mood scheduled Tuesday.

The US, Britain and France have all pushed for the invocation of Chapter Seven of the UN Charter, granting the council power to use military force to “restore international peace and security.” The new French government expressed itself along these lines

last week, with Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius declaring that it was time “to resort to Chapter Seven” to make the terms of the cease-fire agreement brokered by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan “mandatory.”

Making it clear that the Socialist Party government of François Hollande is, if anything, even more bellicose towards France’s former Middle East colony than that of his right-wing predecessor, Fabius also announced that Paris would follow Washington’s example in supplying supposedly “non-lethal” aid to the armed militias battling the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

“There is Annan’s effort, but we are also considering—and the Americans have done this—not giving weapons but providing communications equipment so that a stronger revolt develops amongst the population,” Fabius told France Inter radio on Friday.

He said that the alternative to the Annan plan was “a clear victory of the opposition on the ground.” He added that this could be achieved only “through extremely violent confrontations,” and would require external support.

For its part, Washington has sought to step up pressure on Russia, which together with China wields veto power to block any Security Council resolution authorizing the use of military force in Syria. Last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton mounted a Cold War-style provocation against Moscow, claiming—falsely—that Russia was selling new attack helicopters to the Syrian regime that would “escalate the conflict quite dramatically.”

Washington was forced to back off of the charge, acknowledging that the helicopters in question were old ones already in the hands of the Syrian government that

had been sent to Russia for repairs and were being returned. A Pentagon official acknowledged to the *New York Times* that Clinton had seized on the phony controversy and “put a little spin on it to put the Russians in a difficult position.”

The incident set the stage for the first encounter between US President Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin since the latter’s re-election as Russian president. Monday’s G20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico was supposed to include bilateral talks between the two on the Syrian crisis. There was little expectation that Putin would shift Russia’s position, given both Moscow’s interest in preventing its Syrian ally succumbing to a similar fate as the Gaddafi regime in Libya, and the increasingly tense relations between Washington and Moscow over issues ranging from the US missile shield to congressional legislation targeting Russian officials for sanctions over human rights abuses.

On the eve of the G20 summit, the Russian military’s general staff issued a statement affirming that “Several warships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, including large landing ships with marines aboard, are fully prepared” to sail to Syria to protect the Russian navy’s Mediterranean port at Tartus. However, it denied US media reports that the warships had already been dispatched.

While leveling false charges against Russia over arming the Syrian regime, it is indisputable that Washington and its allies have exploited the Annan cease-fire introduced last April to organize the extensive training and arming of the “rebel” militias.

As David Enders, the McClatchy Newspapers correspondent in Syria, reported last week: “The improved supply of weapons to the rebels is clearly evident, both to reporters traveling in rebel-held areas and in the rising death toll among Syrian security forces in clashes with the rebels.” According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition-linked outfit based in Britain, over 1,000 Syrian soldiers have been killed since the Annan cease-fire agreement was implemented.

Enders writes, “Members of the armed opposition say the more sophisticated weapons are being transported across the border from Turkey with the knowledge of the Turkish intelligence service.”

As the *Washington Post* reported last month, the delivery of these weapons, including sophisticated anti-

tank missiles, has been coordinated by Washington and paid for by the reactionary Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Along with the arms shipments has come a steady flow of jihadis, militant Islamist fighters, some with ties to Al Qaeda. As the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*’s correspondent Rainer Hermann reported Sunday, “at least 3,000 fighters” from Libya have reached Syria, most of them through Turkey, where they were sent ostensibly for “medical treatment.”

According to Hermann’s report, the Saudi and Qatari monarchies are discouraging the recruitment of jihadis from their own countries, fearing that, as in the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, this could fuel Islamist insurgencies against their own regimes. The report cites a June 7 fatwa by the Saudi senior clergy forbidding any appeals for “jihad in Syria” or any other aid to the Syrian opposition outside of official state channels.



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