

Russia hits back at US after 'barbarism' tag over Aleppo airstrikes

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Beirut: Amid continuing airstrikes on rebel-held areas of Aleppo by Russia and Syria, Moscow today hit back at the United States, France and Britain for accusing it of "barbarism" and war crimes.

Britain, France and the US had slammed Russia and Damascus over the worsening condition in Syria with US Ambassador Samantha Power accusing Russia of "barbarism" during an emergency meeting of the Security Council called by the three nations.

The three countries had called upon Russia to rein in its ally Syria and halt bombing in Aleppo where hundreds of civilians have been killed in the last few days.

"Instead of pursuing peace, Russia and Assad make war," US Ambassador Samantha Power said.

"What Russia is sponsoring and doing is not counter-terrorism. It is barbarism," she said, adding that "It's apocalyptic what is being done in eastern Aleppo."

Responding to US allegations, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov today said, "We note the overall unacceptable tone and rhetoric of the representatives of the United Kingdom and the United States, which can damage and harm our relations."

The US, Britain and France heaped blame on Moscow for supporting the Syrian offensive which U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura termed as among the worst of the 5 and a half year war.

At least 26 civilians were killed in fresh government airstrikes on the contested city of Aleppo, Syrian activists said Sunday.

When Syria's U.N. Ambassador Bashar Ja'afari was called to speak in the council, the ambassadors of the three Western powers walked out in protest.

They had demanded a halt to the Aleppo offensive and immediate council action, and their walkout demonstrated anger and frustration not only at Damascus but at Russia for backing close ally Bashar Assad's military campaign while talking about reviving a cessation of hostilities.

As the government offensive entered its fourth day on Sunday, medical workers and local officials reported airstrikes on neighborhoods throughout Aleppo's rebel-held eastern districts.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported 26 civilians had been killed by 7:30 p.m. and said it expects the toll to rise. Ibrahim Alhaj of the Syrian Civil Defense search and rescue outfit gave a higher toll, saying hospitals and rescuers had documented the deaths of 43 people so far on Sunday.

At the start of the Security Council meeting, U.N. envoy de Mistura said the offensive against eastern Aleppo, where up to 275,000 people "have been under a form of de facto siege for almost 20 days," followed the U.S.-led coalition's bombing of Syrian troops, which Washington called a tragic mistake, and a deadly attack on a U.N. convoy carrying desperately needed humanitarian aid.

"But no incident, irrespective of whether it can be attributed or not, does justify what is going on in front of our own eyes: the unraveling of the cessation of hostilities and the simultaneous unleashing of unprecedented military violence affecting innocent civilians as well," he said.

He urged the United States and Russia "to go that extra mile to see if they can save their agreement of Sept. 9 and do so at the eleventh hour."

He also urged the Security Council to press for a cessation of hostilities, weekly 48-hour pauses to deliver aid, and medical evacuations for several urgent cases in eastern Aleppo.

De Mistura said Syrians and the international community are swiftly losing any remaining hope with Washington and Moscow "unless we salvage what was agreed on."

"All we can expect from Aleppo if the Syrian government is intent on retaking it is ... a slow, grinding, street-by-street fight, over the course of months, if not years, whereby the ancient city will be almost completely destroyed," he warned.

De Mistura reiterated that "a so-called military 'solution' or victory in Syria is impossible, including in Aleppo."

After the meeting ended, he told reporters: "Everything hangs in the balance right now." And what happens next depends on the Russians and Americans, he said.

Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin blamed Syria's rebels for sabotaging the cease-fire agreement by using the lull to shore up their forces, and he accused the Western coalition of failing to separate the moderate factions it backs from "terrorist" groups especially the al-Qaida-linked Fatah Sham Front.

"In Syria, hundreds of armed groups are being armed," Churkin said. "The territory of the country is being bombed indiscriminately. Bringing a peace is almost an impossible task now."

But he made clear that Moscow hasn't given up on a cessation of hostilities.

"Of course, I would like this very much to be our aim as well as the renewal of negotiations," he said.

Churkin stressed, however, that Russia first wants to see "a sincere desire" by the U.S. coalition to separate the moderate opposition from the Fatah Sham Front.

Power said the United States knows "that Russia has consistently said one thing, and done the opposite."

But she said the U.S. also believes it must do "everything in our power to find a way to halt the violence."

"That is why, even now, we will continue to look for any way possible to restore the cessation of hostilities," Power said.

While intra-Syria negotiations remain the aim of the Western powers and Russia, a broad coalition of 33 Syrian rebel factions issued a statement Sunday saying: "Negotiations under the present conditions are no longer useful and are meaningless."

The opposition groups said they won't accept any Russian mediation, calling Moscow a "partner to the regime in the crimes against our people."

They also called on the government and Russian forces to halt airstrikes and lift sieges on opposition areas where the U.N. estimates 600,000 Syrians are trapped.

On the sidelines of the meeting, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged an end to the offensive saying the bombs "are not busting bunkers, they are demolishing ordinary people looking for any last refuge of safety."

"International law is clear: The systematic use of indiscriminate weapons in densely populated areas is a war crime," he said.

Prior to the start of the U.N. meeting, British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said Russia should be investigated for war crimes following the attack on the aid convoy that claimed 20 lives. And France's Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said Russia and Iran will be guilty of war crimes if they don't pressure Assad to stop escalating violence.

Rebels, meanwhile, shelled Masyaf, a government stronghold near the central city of Hama, for the second day in a row on Sunday, according to the Observatory.

Masyaf is home to a large number of Alawites, members of Assad's sect. The Syrian leader has rallied Syria's minorities behind his government behind fears of the Sunni-dominated rebellion.

On a positive note, a set of four towns, two besieged by government forces and two by rebels, were reached by aid convoys for the first time in nearly six months on Sunday, the International Committee for the Red Cross announced.

The organization said it had reached 60,000 residents trapped in the towns of Madaya, Zabadani, Foua, and Kafraya.

- (With AP inputs)