

Reform or go, Russia's Medvedev tells Syria leaders
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MOSCOW, Oct 7 — Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said today Syria's leaders should step down if they cannot enact reforms, but warned the West not to try to push President Bashar al-Assad from power.

Medvedev's remarks appeared aimed to push Assad toward compromise and to patch up Russia's image after it blocked a UN Security Council draft resolution that would have condemned Syria's deadly crackdown on pro-democracy protesters.

He also made clear that Russia opposes change in Syria on terms set by the West.

"We are using our channels and are actively working with the Syrian leadership, we are demanding that the Syrian leadership implement the necessary reforms," state-run RIA quoted Medvedev as telling his presidential Security Council.

"If the Syrian leadership is incapable of conducting such reforms, it will have to go, but this decision should be taken not in Nato or certain European countries, it should be taken by the Syrian people and the Syrian leadership," he said.

Russia has repeatedly urged Syria's government to implement promised reforms, but has differed starkly with Western nations by saying Assad needs more time to do so, and has said his opponents share the blame for months of bloodshed.

The remarks were Medvedev's bluntest warning yet to Assad, whose country has close ties with Moscow, one of its main arms suppliers, and hosts a Russian naval maintenance facility.

It came four days after Russia and China used their power as permanent UN Security Council members to veto a European-drafted, US-backed resolution that could have opened the door to sanctions against Syria's government.

The double veto drew vocal criticism from the West, with the US ambassador to the United Nations expressing "outrage", and threatened to further hurt Russia's reputation among opponents of autocratic rulers across the Middle East and North Africa.

Along with the warning to Assad, Medvedev repeated Russia's criticism of Syrian dissidents and of the draft UN resolution, which he said could have led to military intervention.

"It is no less necessary to demand of the other participants in the Syrian conflict that they dissociate themselves from extremists in the most decisive way," Itar-Tass quoted him as saying.

Russia had warned it would oppose almost any resolution condemning Assad, making Syria a red line for Moscow after it had allowed Nato air strikes in Libya by refraining from using its veto in a Security Council vote in March.

Russia has accused the West of betraying its trust, charging that Nato overstepped its mandate to protect civilians and used the UN resolution to depose Muammar Gaddafi by

force.

Medvedev suggested the latest draft resolution on Syria had a similar aim and said other Security Council nations had refused to include language ruling out military intervention.

"We understand that Syria is not Libya. But the essence of the text that was proposed was a text once again allowing the use of weapons," Interfax quoted him as saying. — Reuters

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