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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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WaPo article - most telling quotes from article b/l:

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In Syria, world inaction fuels armed revolt



Anti-regime protesters chant slogans and flash the victory sign as they march during a demonstration at the mountain resort town of Zabadani, Syria. (AP)

Liz Sly
Wednesday, Jan 18, 2012

BEIRUT — Growing indications that a deeply divided international community is either unable or unwilling to intervene to halt the violence in Syria are fueling an armed rebellion that risks plunging the country, and perhaps the region, into a wider war.

The slide toward all-out conflict seemed to accelerate Wednesday after the opposition claimed that Syrian government forces had been forced to accept a cease-fire negotiated with rebel soldiers in the town of Zabadani, near the Lebanese border.

Rebel soldiers who identified themselves as members of the Free Syrian Army and a Zabadani activist said loyalist soldiers retreated Wednesday afternoon, five days after launching an offensive to quell dissent in Zabadani. The mountain resort 20 miles north of Damascus is one of as many as three dozen places in Syria that the opposition says have slipped beyond government control in recent weeks.

Witnesses said the government troops appeared to be heading toward another of the restive towns outside the capital. Offensives by Damascus have ebbed and flowed throughout the 10-month-old uprising, and the rebels acknowledged that the security forces may merely be regrouping before returning with reinforcements. The account, widely reported by Arabic TV networks but not by government media, could not be independently confirmed.

Activists nonetheless hailed the event as a symbolic turning point, heralding the possibility that the simmering armed revolt may force President Bashar al-Assad's government to compromise.

"To force the regime to negotiate with the people and withdraw their soldiers under pressure is a political victory," Kamal Labwani, a dissident who was freed in November after serving nearly 10 years in prison, said by telephone from Jordan.

"This shows we can achieve freedom by ourselves and not with the help of forces coming from outside. It means that if we take up weapons, we can defend ourselves and bring our own freedom," he said.

Evidence has mounted for months that the once-peaceful Syrian opposition has been resorting to arms, but the fading hope of outside help is hardening the conviction that only violence will dislodge Assad, activists say.

"Until now there is not civil war, but if the international community continues like this, just watching and doing nothing, there will be," said Omar Shakir, an activist in the Bab Amr neighborhood of Homs, which has emerged as the epicenter of the armed rebellion.

An Arab League monitoring mission has been unable to stop the killing, the Syrian opposition's mostly exiled political leadership has proved too divided to present a coherent alternative to the Assad government, and the daily death toll tallied by both sides shows the steadily escalating bloodshed.

On Wednesday, the official SANA news agency reported the funerals of 14 members of the security forces who were killed by what it called "terrorists." Activist groups said the security forces killed at least 21 people.

"This is not going to stop. It's becoming an armed rebellion, it's going to be chaos, and I don't know why the world doesn't understand that," said Rami Jarrah, a Syrian activist living in Cairo who was forced to flee Damascus in October after the security forces learned his identity.

Jarrah and other observers say they fear the inaction will not only encourage opponents of the government to fight but also encourage a drift toward extreme ideologies.

"People are getting more angry now as they realize there won't be any help," he said. "It's building up hatred to the West, and it's becoming extremism. It's very dangerous now."

Protesters have clamored for a NATO no-fly zone similar to the one that helped bring about the fall of Moammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya, but as they come to realize that Western intervention in Syria is unlikely, Islamist groups are winning support, said Wissam Tarif, a human rights campaigner with the activist group Avaaz.

"The only people who are organized and credible are the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis," he said. "The dangerous thing is almost no one believes in peaceful struggle anymore. They want weapons."

Activists in Syria say they have no agenda or ideology other than Assad's ouster, but they acknowledge that Sunni Islamists have been gaining ground in the battle to dislodge a regime dominated by Assad's minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, raising the prospect of heightened sectarianism.

"Until a month ago, no one supported the Brotherhood, but today we would support Israel if they helped us take Bashar out," said Shakir, the activist in Homs. "Today we support anyone without questions if they help us."

Yet the international community is as divided as the Syrian opposition over how to address the dangerously intractable revolt.

Russia made it clear Wednesday that it would veto any U.N. Security Council resolution that might open the door to international intervention, dampening U.S. and European hopes of revisiting efforts to condemn Syria at the world body after Russian and Chinese vetoes of a resolution in October.

"If some intend to use force at all cost . . . we can hardly prevent that from happening," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters in Moscow. "But let them do it at their own initiative on their own conscience. They won't get any authorization from the U.N. Security Council."

The stakes for Russia are high. Syria is a longtime ally dating to the Cold War era, and Russia relies on its basing rights at the Syrian port of Tartous for access to the Mediterranean. Lavrov declined to confirm or deny widespread reports that a Russian ship delivered 60 tons of weaponry to the Syrian government during a stop at the port last week.

"We are only trading with Syria in items which aren't banned by international law," he said.

The Russian comments shifted the focus of diplomacy back to the Arab League monitoring mission, which is due to announce its conclusions Thursday. Arab League ministers are set to meet in Cairo over the weekend to decide whether to renew the mission or seek U.N. support for broader action.

But the Arab world also is split over how to deal with the unfolding violence in a country whose complex ethnic and sectarian makeup mirrors many of the region's most explosive fault lines. Iraq and Lebanon, with Shiite majorities, have sided with the Syrian government, as has Shiite Iran. The Sunni-led states of the Arabian Gulf, spearheaded by Qatar, are pressing for tougher action to replace the government, and the emir of Qatar told CBS that he would support the dispatch of Arab troops to Syria to end the violence.

Tellingly, however, the comment was made in an interview two months ago but was not discussed until the network aired it on the weekend. It appears to have garnered little support.

slyl@washpost.com