

Wave of attacks kill 62 in Nigeria

Death toll could reach 100: Police

AFP, Kano

A wave of attacks in northern Nigeria attributed to a radical Islamist group killed 62 people, medical sources said yesterday.

But the death toll from attacks could reach 100, police and a local rights group said.

"From reports I have been receiving from Damaturu, up to 100 people could have been killed," a senior police source in the region told AFP, while Chidi Odinkalu, head of the Open Society Justice Initiative, gave a figure of 69-100.

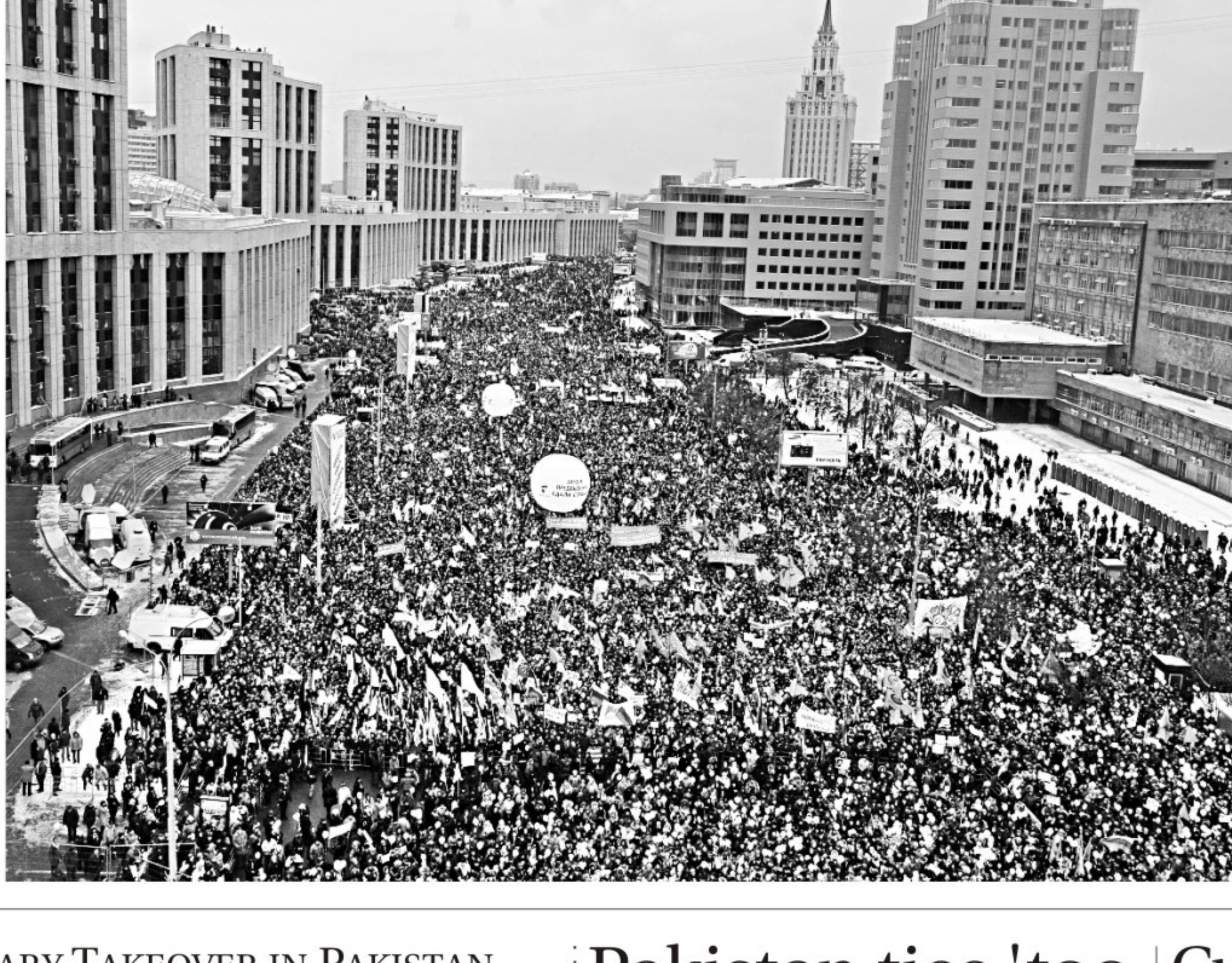
The two days of attacks which saw three cities rocked by explosions and gunfire were carried out by the Boko Haram group, according to a purported spokesman, Abul Qaqa, who spoke to AFP.

"We will continue to wage war ... until we abolish the secular system and establish an Islamic state," he said.

Sporadic firing could still be heard yesterday but the situation was generally calm, local residents and security officials said. A 7:00pm to 7:00am curfew has been declared till further notice.

Boko Haram is responsible for the August suicide bombing of UN headquarters in the capital Abuja that killed 24. The group also led coordinated attacks on Damaturu in early November killing 150.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation with some 160 million people, roughly divided between a mainly Muslim north and predominately Christian south.



People protest against the December 4 parliament elections in Moscow yesterday. Tens of thousands of people filled an avenue in Moscow to protest against the alleged rigging of parliamentary polls in a new challenge to Russian strongman Vladimir Putin's authority.

PHOTO: AFP

EGYPT POLLS 2nd round also goes to Islamists

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's main Islamist parties won 65 percent of votes for party lists in the second round of a historic election for a new parliament after Hosni Mubarak's ouster, the electoral committee said yesterday.

The Freedom and Justice Party won 36.5 percent of the vote for party lists, with 4,058,498 out of 11,173,818 votes, according to figures provided by the electoral committee for the second round which was held on December 14.

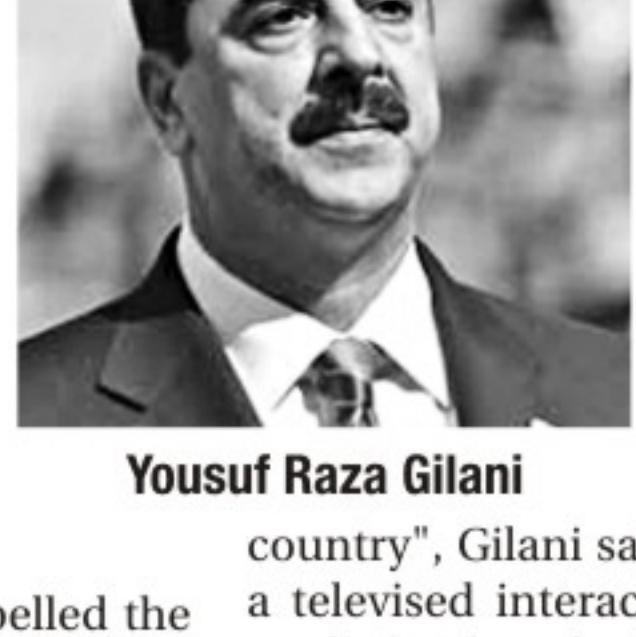
The elections were scheduled over three rounds, with run-offs for individual candidates after each round.

After winning almost 65 percent of seats in the first round of the vote, Islamists are poised to dominate the next lower house which will convene on January 23.

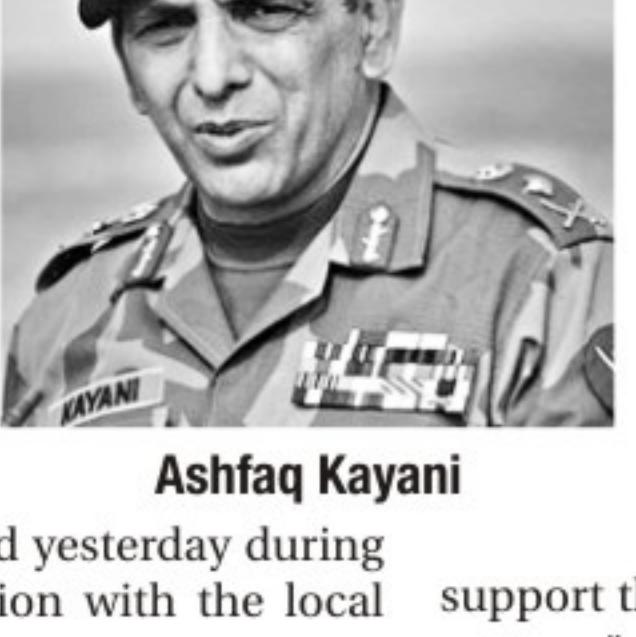
GROWING TENSION OVER MILITARY TAKEOVER IN PAKISTAN

Gilani welcomes Kayani's pledge for democracy

AFP, Islamabad



Yousaf Raza Gilani



Ashfaq Kayani

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani yesterday welcomed a statement by army chief General Ashfaq Kayani ruling out a military takeover in the country.

Tensions between the army and government appeared to have soared in recent days over a secret memo that allegedly sought US intervention to prevent a feared coup.

"He (Kayani) strongly dispelled the speculations of any military takeover and said that these are misleading and are being used as a bogey to divert the focus from real issues," a military statement Friday cited Kayani as saying.

This statement "is extremely well taken by democratic circles in the

possibility of a coup as he examined calls from the army and the opposition to probe the memo scandal.

On Thursday, Gilani delivered an unprecedented tirade against the military and accused "conspirators" -- whom he did not name -- of plotting to bring down his government.

But Kayani dismissed those concerns, saying that the army "will continue to support the democratic process in the country".

The leaked memo allegedly sought US intervention to prevent a feared military coup in exchange for overhauling Pakistan's security leadership after US troops killed Osama bin Laden near the Pakistani capital on May 2.

Pakistan ties 'too important' to fail

Says US, suspends drone strikes

AFP, Washington

The United States said Friday that it was committed to working with Pakistan and pledged support for democracy, amid friction between the war partners and a political showdown in Islamabad.

"The issues that we face -- the challenges we face -- are too important," State Department spokesman Mark Toner told reporters.

"We desire a closer, more productive relationship with Pakistan both militarily and as well as politically. And we're constantly working to build that closer cooperation," he said.

Meanwhile, the US Central Intelligence Agency has suspended drone missile strikes on gatherings of low-ranking militants in Pakistan to ease tensions with that country, The Los Angeles Times reported.

US-Pakistani relations deteriorated last month after a series of US air strikes killed 24 Pakistan soldiers near the border with Afghanistan.

Some officials in the State Department and the National Security Council say many of the airstrikes are counterproductive, The Times said. They argue that Pakistani claims of civilian casualties, which the United States dispute, have destabilized the government of President Asif Ali Zardari.

Cuba to free 2,900 in sweeping amnesty

REUTERS, Havana



Raul Castro

Cuba will release 2,900 prisoners in the coming days for humanitarian reasons in a sweeping amnesty ahead of a visit next spring by Pope Benedict XVI, the Cuban government said on Friday.

Those to be pardoned do not include American Alan Gross, serving 15 years in prison for setting up Internet equipment on the island under a secretive US programme in a case that stalled progress in US-Cuba relations, a government spokesman said.

President Raul Castro said the ruling Council of State that granted the amnesty had "taken into account" the upcoming papal visit and requests by, among others, top Roman Catholic Church officials in Cuba and family members of the prisoners.

The action showed the "generosity and strength" of the Cuban revolution, he said in a speech to the National Assembly.

Those to be released included some who had been convicted for crimes against "the security of the state," but the government spokesman said they were not jailed for political reasons.

Cuba freed more than a 100 political prisoners in a deal brokered by the Catholic Church in 2010. Cuban dissidents have said there are still at least 60 people behind bars for political reasons.

NEWS IN brief

Prince Philip doing well after surgery

AFP, Cambridge

Britain's Prince Philip, the husband of Queen Elizabeth II, "had a good night" in hospital after heart surgery and family members would visit him yesterday, Buckingham Palace said.

The 90-year-old had a successful operation on Friday for a blocked coronary artery, after being taken to hospital by helicopter from the queen's Sandringham estate, where the royal family is celebrating Christmas.

"The Duke of Edinburgh had a good night. There will be some members of the family visiting him this morning in hospital," a spokeswoman for the palace told AFP on Saturday.

The spokeswoman did not give further details of his condition or of which royals were expected to visit him.

But in a separate statement overnight, the palace said the prince had been taken to the Papworth cardiothoracic hospital in Cambridge, eastern England, on Friday after suffering chest pains.

Tunisia assembly nods at new govt

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's constituent assembly on Friday overwhelmingly approved the north African country's new government, two months after the first free elections since its January revolution.

The line-up unveiled Thursday by Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party was approved in a confidence vote with 154 in favour, 38 opposed and 11 abstaining, after a full day's debate.

The 41-member cabinet was the result of long negotiations between Ennahda and its two left-leaning allies.

10,000 US troops leave Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

The US military has withdrawn 10,000 troops from Afghanistan before a year-end deadline set by President Barack Obama, officers said Friday, the first step in a planned drawdown of combat forces through 2014.

The withdrawal left about 91,000 American troops on the ground in Afghanistan, spokesman Commander Bill Speaks told AFP.

Obama announced a surge of 33,000 forces in December 2009 to turn the tide in the war.

After declaring major progress against the Taliban insurgency, Obama has since promised to withdraw the reinforcements in two stages: 10,000 by the end of this year and another 23,000 by the end of next summer.

"They have met the first target of recovering 10,000 of the surge forces by the end of the year," Speaks said.



A Syrian man dressed as Santa Claus plays with orphans during a Christmas celebration at the Mar Takla monastery in the Christian village of Maalula on Friday. Nine months of unrest in Syria have stripped Christian neighbourhoods of any sign of Christmas joy as Syrian Christians have decided to cancel celebrations and only observe Christmas mass.

US has found 5,000 missiles in Libya

AFP, Washington

US experts sent to Libya to recover weapons left over by the regime of fallen leader Muammar Gaddafi have found about 5,000 surface-to-air missiles, the State Department said Friday.

The exact number is difficult to say, said spokesman Mark Toner, as there is no actual inventory and a number were destroyed in Nato air strikes this year.

The State Department was still trying to evaluate how many missiles existed there, which can pose a danger to civilian aircraft, he said.

But he refused to confirm rumours that the US was seeking to buy back some of the weapons which might have been looted from open stockpiles during the war.

Progress claimed on bioweapons control

AFP, Washington

Progress has been made in protecting against the threat of biological weapons, the State Department said Friday at the end of global talks which agreed to boost moves to thwart their spread.

The 165 signatories to the biological and toxin weapons convention agreed to "a multinational work program for the next five years that promises to revitalise global efforts to reduce biological threats."

The convention, which came into force in 1975, bans the development, manufacture or stockpiling of biological weapons.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who opened the conference in Geneva on December 7, had sought to rally international efforts against the threat of a biological attack, saying the warning signs were "too serious to ignore."

She told the three-week conference that the risk of a bioweapons attack was "both a serious national security challenge and a foreign policy priority."

Hillary urged more transparency from member states to boost confidence that signatories were living up to their obligations under the 1975 treaty, which could be achieved through a review of the annual reporting system.

The conference agreed to review the treaty's annual reporting system and over the next five years will build ways of dealing with disease outbreaks as well as setting up a database to transfer information and calls for help.

Iran starts major naval drill

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Saturday began 10 days of wargames around the Strait of Hormuz, a vital route in the Gulf through which more than a third of the world's ship-borne oil passes.

The Velayat-90 military exercises, announced Thursday by navy chief Admiral Habibollah Sayari, kicked off as planned, Iran's Arabic-language broadcaster Al-Alam reported.

Iranian navy forces were being deployed throughout the wargame area to the east of the Strait of Hormuz, comprising the Gulf of Oman around to the Gulf of Aden, in the first phase of the exercises, Al-Alam said, citing navy command.

UN condemns Syria attacks

US, Russia trade barbs at UN

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Friday condemned suicide attacks in the Syrian capital but remained deadlocked on a full resolution on the crisis with the Russian and US ambassadors trading personal barbs.

Russian envoy Vitaly Churkin hit out at what he called the "Stanford dictionary of expletives" used against him by US ambassador Susan Rice.

His American counterpart, a graduate of the elite California university, had earlier accused Churkin of using calls for an investigation into Nato air strikes in Libya as a "cheap stunt" to divert attention from Syria.

The council "condemned in the strongest terms the terrorist attacks" that Syrian authorities say left at least 40 dead, said a statement which took intense talks between the 15 members.

President Bashar al-Assad's government blamed al-Qaeda for the suicide attacks on two Damascus bases. But the Syrian opposition say Assad's forces committed the strikes.

UN leader Ban Ki-moon is "gravely concerned" at the escalating violence but also stressed that Assad must fully implement an Arab League peace plan to end 10 months of strife in the country which the UN says has left at least 5,000 dead.

Western diplomats have expressed skepticism that Arab League monitors in Damascus will be allowed to work effectively and Ban said the full mission "must be given unhindered access."

Russia on Friday presented a new draft resolution on the crisis that Western governments immediately rejected as still not tough enough on Assad.

"We know what arms embargo means these days. It means that -- we saw it in Libya -- that you cannot supply weapons to the government but everybody else can supply weapons to various opposition groups," said the Russian envoy.

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