Russia confident Syria will not use chemical weapons

By Steve Gutterman, Reuters, 22 Aug 2012.

MOSCOW - Russia believes Syria has no intention of using its chemical weapons and is able to safeguard them, the Russian newspaper Kommersant reported on Wednesday, citing an unidentified Foreign Ministry official.

The report seemed aimed to reassure the West that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will not use chemical weapons against rebels after U.S. President Barack Obama threatened "enormous consequences" if Damascus even moved them in a menacing way.

A "confidential dialogue" with the Syrian government on the security of the arsenal has convinced Russia that "the Syrian authorities do not intend to use these weapons and are capable of keeping them under control themselves," Kommersant reported.

The Russian Foreign Ministry declined immediate comment on the report, which cited the official as saying Russia considered it "entirely probable" the United States would take military action if it saw a threat from chemical arms.

Russia vehemently opposes military intervention in Syria, where Assad has given Moscow its firmest Middle East foothold in recent years, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned the West against unilateral action on Tuesday.

Russia and China have vetoed three Western-backed U.N. Security Council resolutions that
would have raised pressure on Assad to stop bloodshed that the United Nations says has killed more than 18,000 people since protests began in March 2011.

But after a Syrian official acknowledged last month that the country had chemical weapons and could use them against external aggressors, Russia says it had told Syria even the threat to employ the arsenal was unacceptable.

Kommersant also quoted the Foreign Ministry official as saying the United States had "firmly warned insurgents not to even come close to chemical weapons storage sites and production plants" and that "opposition groups are heeding" those demands.

"This shows that the West can exert very specific influence on Assad's opponents when wants to do so," the official said.

Russia, which Western officials say has aggravated the violence in Syria by shielding Assad from pressure through its Security Council vetoes, contends that the West is encouraging rebels and must instead press them to stop fighting.

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