Divided UN falters in response to alleged Syria chemical attack

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Russia on Tuesday vetoed a US-drafted United Nations Security Council resolution that would have set up an investigation into chemical weapons use in Syria following an alleged toxic gas attack in rebel-held Douma.

It was the 12th time that Russia has used its veto power at the council to block action targeting its Syrian ally.

A rival measure put forward by Moscow failed to garner enough votes for adoption, laying bare the divisions within the council over Syria as the threat of Western military action loomed large.

President Donald Trump has warned that there will be a “big price to pay” for the alleged use of toxic gas in Douma that killed at least 40 people, according to Syrian medics and rescuers.

As the showdown between Russia and the United States got underway, Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused the United States of “planting this resolution” as a “pretext” to justify action against Syria.

“We are using the veto in order to protect international rule of law, peace and security, to make sure that you do not drag the Security Council into your adventures,” Nebenzia said.

US Ambassador Nikki Haley shot back, saying “Russia has trashed the credibility of the council.”

“Whenever we propose anything meaningful on Syria, Russia vetoes it. It is a travesty,” she said.

Twelve of the 15 council members backed the US-drafted measure. Bolivia voted against it alongside Russia, while China abstained.

Britain, France and the United States were among the seven countries that voted against the Russian proposal which they argued would not create an independent panel to investigate allegations of chemical weapons use.

Haley dismissed the Russian draft as “all about protecting the Assad regime” because of provisions that would have required the Security Council to endorse its findings.

###  Russia warns US over military action

After warning Monday of “grave repercussions” of US military action, the Russian ambassador urged the United States to “come to your senses” and refrain from ordering strikes on Syria.

“If you took the decision to carry out an illegal military adventure — and we do hope that you will come to your senses — well then you will have to bare responsibility for it,” said Nebenzia.

China backed Russia’s measure along with four other countries, while two others abstained.

A draft resolution requires nine votes to be adopted in the 15-member council and no veto from the five permanent members — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.

Russia has presented a third draft resolution that would support an investigation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, but would not create a mechanism to identify the perpetrators of chemical attacks.

Diplomats said that measure was not expected to pass either.

After both proposals failed to win adoption, Sweden called for a closed-door meeting before the vote on the third measure to discuss the way forward.

Russia and Syria have called for the OPCW to send its experts to the rebel-held town of Douma, where toxic gas was allegedly used in an attack on Saturday that killed dozens.

The OPCW has said the team of experts will deploy to Syria shortly.

The US proposal would have revived the work of a previous panel, known as the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), that shut down in November when Russian vetoed the renewal of its mandate.

That panel had found that the Syrian air force had dropped sarin on the village of Khan Sheikhun in April of last year.