

U.N. Official Rebukes Syria Over Violence

By Rick Gladstone and Neil MacFarquhar, The New York Times

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The top United Nations human rights official offered a grim appraisal of the Syrian conflict on Monday, accusing the government there of interpreting the repeated diplomatic failure to end the violence as a green light to escalate deadly attacks on its political opponents with indiscriminate brutality and “overwhelming force” over the past 10 days.

The appraisal, delivered in a tone of cold frustration by the official, Navi Pillay, the high commissioner for human rights, was presented at an unusual meeting of the 193-nation General Assembly devoted entirely to the Syrian conflict, despite strenuous objections from Syria and a few of its dwindling number of allies, notably Iran and North Korea.

Ms. Pillay’s appraisal, and the support for her expressed by the United States, the Arab League and a wide spectrum of diplomats at the public forum of a General Assembly meeting, amounted to a strong rebuke to Syria. But her frustration also seemed directed at the inability of the United Nations, the Arab League or any other group to devise a workable proposal to help resolve the crisis in Syria, now nearly a year old.

“The longer the international community fails to take action, the more the civilian population will suffer from countless atrocities committed against them,” Ms. Pillay said.

She spoke more than a week after a proposed Security Council compromise resolution, aimed at ending the violence and starting reconciliation talks in a plan advanced by the Arab League, collapsed with a veto by Russia and China, which feared it was a pretext to depose President Bashar al-Assad and possibly invite outside military intervention, as happened in Libya last year.

Mr. Assad’s forces, who contend they are fighting foreign-backed terrorism, have engaged in an intensive assault on his opponents, primarily in the central city of Homs, since the Security Council effort failed. Ms. Pillay said at least 300 people were killed in Homs just in the past 10 days.

“The failure of the Security Council to agree on firm collective action appears to have emboldened the Syrian government to launch an all-out assault in an effort to crush dissent with overwhelming force,” Ms. Pillay said. She added, “The appalling brutality that we are witnessing in Homs is a grim harbinger of worse to come.”

A new Arab League proposal announced Sunday, in which the league and the United Nations would contribute to a joint peacekeeping force in Syria, was immediately rejected by Mr. Assad as more interference in Syria’s internal affairs. It also was disparaged by Russian diplomats, who saw little point in a peacekeeping force without a truce.

The Arab League proposal also found only lukewarm support among Western nations that have been outspoken in their criticism of Mr. Assad. Victoria Nuland, a spokeswoman for the State Department, told reporters in Washington that the United States was studying the Arab League proposal and that “there are a number of challenges in getting it to come together.”

While speeches at the General Assembly were unrolling, behind the scenes diplomats were working on the text of a General Assembly resolution that they said they hoped to put to a vote later in the week. The nonbinding resolution would endorse Arab League efforts toward pursuing a cease-fire and a political solution in the conflict, they said.

In Washington, Turkey’s foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, held lengthy talks on Syria with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, exploring the possibility of additional diplomatic and economic steps. Both indicated that they would attend a meeting of nations in Tunisia on Feb. 24 to discuss support for Syria’s

opposition after the Russia-China veto. Mrs. Clinton said the United States intended to increase humanitarian assistance to Syrians, but provided no details.

Mr. Davutoglu said that the focus remained on finding a political solution to the violence, which he added was possible “even at this moment,” but he also acknowledged that Turkish and other officials were considering additional steps that could involve safe havens or corridors that would require international troops.

“We cannot be silent when this humanitarian tragedy is continuing,” he said during remarks with Mrs. Clinton. “At this moment we are talking on diplomatic and humanitarian steps to be taken, but for other scenarios we hope that those things will not be needed, but we need to think about contingencies as well.”

Political analysts who have been following the conflict said there was little else the United States and its allies could do except strengthening economic sanctions against Mr. Assad, putting Syria’s major backers, notably Russia, on the defensive as the violence escalated, and offering assistance to Mr. Assad’s opponents.

“It’s the best shot we have,” said the Bruce W. Jentleson, a professor of public policy and political science at Duke University and a former senior adviser at the State Department. “The alternatives — to back off or go in militarily — are lousy options. It’s all the more reason to keep the pressure on.”

There were conflicting reports on the fighting in Syria on Monday. The Local Coordination Committees, an activist group that has sought to document killings, said 30 people had been killed, including 4 children and a soldier who had defected. Of those victims, the group said, 11 were killed in Homs, 9 in the northern city of Idlib, 4 in Damascus, 3 in Dara’a, 2 in Aleppo and one in Hama.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, another activist group, said it had counted 20 dead, including three in Homs.

Ms. Pillay was especially critical of what she called the Syrian government’s unbridled assault on Homs, an epicenter of resistance to Mr. Assad. Since the Russia-China veto at the Security Council, she said, the government had used “tanks, mortars, rockets and artillery to pummel the city of Homs.” Citing what she called credible accounts, Ms. Pillay said the Syrian Army had shelled “densely populated neighborhoods of Homs in what appears to be an indiscriminate attack on civilian areas.”

Ms. Pillay also accused the Syrian Army of keeping residents trapped in their homes; cutting off their food, electricity, communications and medical aid; and in some cases firing artillery rounds into makeshift medical clinics.

She also renewed her recommendation that the Security Council refer evidence of atrocities committed by government forces in Syria to the International Criminal Court, citing what she called “independent, credible and corroborated accounts” that suggest that such atrocities have taken place.

Rick Gladstone reported from New York, and Neil MacFarquhar from Beirut, Lebanon. Reporting was contributed by Hwaida Saad from Beirut, Liam Stack from Cairo, Steven Lee Myers from Washington, and Alan Cowell from London.