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## FRANCE CALLS FOR EU-ARAB ACTION GROUP ON SYRIA

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4 January 2012 EU OBSERVER ANDREW RETTMAN France has warned that China and Russia's UN veto will not stop the EU and its Arab allies from helping the opposition in Syria. French President Nicolas Sarkozy wrote in a communique on Saturday (4 February) night: "France is not giving up. It is in consultations with its European and Arab partners to create a 'Friends of the Syrian People Group' with the aim of providing help from the international community for implementing the Arab League initiative." He added that China and Russia are effectively "encouraging the Syrian regime to continue with its cruel and hopeless policy." French foreign minister Alain Juppe in remarks to France 2 TV indicated that the veto has marginalised the UN. "This paralyses the international community," he said. China and Russia at a UN Security Council (UNSC) vote in New York earlier the same day blocked a resolution saying Syrian President Bashar Assad should stop military action and hold free elections under Arab League supervision. All the other council members - including France, Germany, Portugal and the UK, which lobbied hard for its adoption over the past week - voted in favour. Russia - a long-term ally of Syria - has said the unrest is an outside plot fed with money and guns by Syria's enemies and that the opposition is working with Islamist radicals. It has also accused the West of trying to use the UN to justify another Libya-type operation. Its UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin on Saturday said the resolution "does not adequately reflect the realities prevailing in Syria and sends an unbalanced signal to the Syrian parties [that the UN is on the side of the opposition]." China's UN ambassador, Li Baodong blamed the West for causing the UN split. "To push through a vote when parties are still seriously divided over the issue will not help maintain the unity and authority of the Security Council or help resolve the issue," he said. The vote came after news broke of a massacre in the town of Homs on Friday night. Initial reports spoke of between 200 to 400 dead. Rami Abdulrahman, from the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told press the army fired mortars at residential areas. A European Parliament deputy, Belgian liberal Louis Michel, said he had spoken with opposition leaders who put the death toll at over 400 and who told him that "the Syrian army is marching through the streets in gas masks." The UN fiasco is likely to have negative repercussions on EU-China and EU-Russia relations, with member states lining up to condemn their decision. British foreign minister William Hague said: "Russia and China ... sided with the Syrian regime and its brutal suppression of the Syrian people in support of their own national interests" - a reference to their ongoing arms sales to Assad. Sweden's Carl Bildt tweeted "Russia and China are on the wrong side of history ... Munich talks failed" after EU and US envoys held last-minute negotiations before the UN vote with Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov at a security conference in Munich, Germany. For his part, Ken Roth, the head of the US-based NGO Human Rights Watch, tweeted: "In turning his back on the Syria people, was [Russian Prime Minister] Putin too scared of the precedent of the int'l community standing up to a repressive leader?" Tens of thousands of people rallied in Moscow on Saturday to protest against Putin - the largest-ever challenge in his 13-year rule.

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Kaynak/Source: