

A chance for South Africa to do the right thing for Syria Daniel Bekele and Philippe Bolopion
Human Rights Watch 2
February 2012

Daniel Bekele is the Executive Director of the Africa division and Philippe Bolopion is UN Director at Human Rights Watch.

Will history repeat itself at the United Nations (UN) Security Council? The last time South Africa was called to vote on a resolution on Syria, on October 4 last year, it chose to abstain, along with India and Brazil.

By doing so, the South African government empowered Russia and China to veto a draft resolution that was designed to pressure the Syrian government into ending the violence against its own people. At that stage, the civilian toll in Syria was, according to the UN, almost 2700 dead, which included many children and women.

Four months later, the death toll has more than doubled — the latest UN report was 5400 dead, but as the country descends into chaos, the UN said it could not keep track of the deaths any more.

We'll never know how events might have unfolded and how many lives might have been spared had the Security Council sent a strong, united message in October. It is still not too late for the council to speak out on this crisis.

Once again, Russia has taken the lead in blocking Security Council action on Syria. (...)

The draft resolution does not mention sanctions, nor any reference to the use of force, yet Moscow is stoking fears that this would lead to a Libya-style intervention.

Russia knows this resonates with South Africa, which has invoked the spectre of the use of force in Syria and warned of possible "hidden agendas."

But Russia might have its own "hidden agendas" in Syria. It seems bent on protecting its alliance with the Syrian government, which has long been a trading partner in the region. (...)

South Africa has argued that the West misused the UN resolution on Libya, going beyond its

purpose of protecting civilians to overthrow Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and says it fears similar overreach in Syria.

Yet the resolution at the Security Council provides absolutely no authorisation for military intervention in Syria.

If South African diplomats are suspicious of spin by western powers, they could listen to Navi Pillay, the UN's human rights chief, who denounced the "ruthless repression" threatening to "plunge Syria into civil war" when she urged the Security Council to take action in December. (...)

South Africa did not listen, so it is once again faced with a historic choice.

Will it settle political scores with the West at the expense of the Syrian people? Will it hide in the shadow of Russia, which is arming and supporting the Syrian repression machine?

Or will it join the efforts of the Arab League and democratic countries trying to peacefully end the bloodshed?

We can only hope South Africa will do the right thing this time and support the Security Council efforts to protect the Syrian people. Let's not wait for the death toll to double again.

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