

Saturday, 27 April 2013

Russian envoy warns on Syria chemical arms 'pretext'



Claims that chemical weapons have been used in Syria should not become a pretext for a foreign military intervention in the country, Russia's deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov said on Saturday. "If there is serious evidence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, it should be presented immediately and not concealed," said Bogdanov, who is Russian President Vladimir Putin's Middle East envoy, during a visit to Beirut. "We must check the information immediately and in conformity with international criteria and not use it to achieve other objectives. It must not be a pretext for an intervention in Syria," added Bogdanov, according to an Arabic translation of his remarks. "We must know the truth and have proof and not rely on information reported in the media which is not supported by facts," Bogdanov said in Arabic on the Al-Manar television station of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, also allied to Assad.

On Thursday, U.S. officials said for the first time that there was evidence the Syrian regime had likely used chemical weapons in small quantities, emphasizing that additional investigation was necessary to confirm the suspicions.

U.S. President Barack Obama on Friday promised a "vigorous investigation" into the reports and renewed his warning that proof of their use would be a "game changer."

Obama is awaiting a "definitive judgment" on whether the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against rebel fighters before taking action, AFP reported the White House as saying on Friday.

He said the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime would constitute a “red line,” though it remains unclear if the American administration is willing to intervene militarily in the Syrian conflict. Russia, one of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's staunchest allies, is firmly opposed to military intervention in Syria. “We have the past experience of another violent intervention in Iraqi affairs under the pretext of the presence of nuclear weapons, and it turned out in the end that there was nothing,” he added. The experience of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 looms large over claims of chemical weapons use in Syria, with critics claiming the allegations are a pretext for international intervention in the conflict. Bogdanov met Saturday with the head of Hezbollah's parliamentary group, Mohammed Raad, a meeting the envoy described as “very useful,” without adding details. Hezbollah, a long-standing ally of the Assad regime, has dispatched fighters to Syria to battle alongside government troops, raising tensions inside Lebanon.