

Russia begins airstrikes in Syria, West disputes targets

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia launched airstrikes Wednesday in Syria, sharply escalating Moscow’s role in the conflict but also raising questions about whether its intent is fighting Islamic State militants or protecting longtime ally, President Bashar Assad.

President Vladimir Putin called it a pre-emptive strike against the militants, and the Russian Defense Ministry said its warplanes targeted and destroyed eight positions belonging to extremists from the IS group, also known as ISIL or ISIS. It did not give specific locations.

But French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told lawmakers in Paris: “Curiously, they didn’t hit Islamic State. I will let you draw a certain number of conclusions yourselves.”

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter also said the Russians appeared to have targeted areas that did not include IS militants and complained Moscow did not use formal channels to give advance notice of its airstrikes to Washington, which is conducting its own airstrikes in Syria against the Islamic State group.

He said the Russians should not be supporting the Assad government and their military moves are “doomed to fail.”

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Washington was prepared to welcome Russian military action in Syria as long as it is directed against IS and other al-Qaida affiliates, but would have “grave concerns” if it conducted strikes against other groups.

The U.S. and Russia both agree on the need to fight the Islamic State but not about what to do with Assad.

The Syrian civil war, which grew out of an uprising against Assad, has killed more than 250,000 people since March 2011 and sent millions of refugees fleeing to other countries in the Middle East and Europe.

Russia’s first airstrikes in Syria came after Putin met Monday with President Barack Obama on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in New York, where they discussed Moscow’s military



Homs Media Centre via AP

In this image made from video provided by Homs Media Centre, which has been verified and is consistent with other AP reporting, smoke rises after airstrikes by military jets in Talbiseh of the Homs province, western Syria, Wednesday.

buildup in the country. Obama had said the U.S. and Russia could work together on a political transition, but only if the result was Assad’s departure.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the Russians’ new action “calls into question their strategy, because when President Putin and President Obama had the opportunity to meet at the U.N. earlier this week, much of their discussion was focused on the need for a political transition inside Syria.”

Putin, who is Assad’s most powerful backer, justified the airstrikes as a move to not only stabilize Syria, but also help stifle global terrorism.

“If they (militants) succeed in Syria, they will return to their home country, and they will come to Russia, too,” Putin said at a government session.

According to a statement from Assad’s office, the Syrian leader had asked Putin for the support.

Kerry said Russian operations must not support Assad or interfere with those of the U.S.-led coalition that is already attacking Islamic State targets.

He called for an urgent start to military-to-military talks to prevent

any kind of conflict between Russia and the coalition.

“If Russia’s recent actions and those now ongoing reflect a genuine commitment to defeat (the Islamic State) then we are prepared to welcome those efforts and to find a way to de-conflict our operations and thereby multiply military pressure on ISIL and affiliated groups,” Kerry said. “But we must not and will not be confused in our fight against ISIL with support for Assad.”

He added that the U.S. “would have grave concerns should Russia strike areas where ISIL and al-Qaida affiliated targets are not operating,” he said. “Strikes of that kind would question Russia’s real intentions fighting ISIL or protecting the Assad regime.”

Russia targeted positions, vehicles and warehouses believed to belong to IS militants, Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov told Russian news agencies.

A senior U.S. official, however, said the airstrikes don’t appear to be targeting IS, because the militants aren’t in the western part of Syria, beyond Homs, where the strikes were directed. It appears the strikes were directed against opposition

groups fighting Assad, according to the official, who wasn’t authorized to discuss the Russian airstrikes publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Syrian state TV quoted an unidentified military official as saying that Russian planes targeted IS positions in central Syria, including the areas of Rastan and Talbiseh, and areas near the town of Salamiyeh in Hama province.

IS controls parts of Homs province, including the ancient town of Palmyra. Homs also has positions run by al-Qaida’s affiliate in Syria, known as the Nusra Front. Both groups have fighters from the former Soviet Union, including Chechens.

Genevieve Casagrande of the Institute of the Study of War said the airstrike on Talbiseh, “did not hit ISIS militants and rather resulted in a large number of civilian casualties.”

“If confirmed, the airstrike would signal Russian intent to assist in the Syrian regime’s war effort at large, rather than securing the regime’s coastal heartland of Latakia and Tartous,” she said.

Khaled Khoja, head of the Syrian National Council opposition group, said at the U.N. that Russian

airstrikes in four areas, including Talbiseh, killed 36 civilians, with five children among the dead. The claim could not be independently verified.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said claims of civilian casualties were part of an “information war ... which, it appears, someone prepared well.”

U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby said a Russian official in Baghdad had told U.S. Embassy personnel in the Iraqi capital that Russian military aircraft would shortly begin flying anti-IS missions in Syria. The Russian official also asked that U.S. aircraft avoid Syrian airspace during those missions Wednesday. Kirby didn’t say whether the U.S. agreed to that request.

The U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity said there were no conflicts with the Russian strikes, and they had no impact on coalition missions, primarily in the north and east.

Earlier Wednesday, Russian lawmakers voted unanimously to allow Putin to order the airstrikes in Syria, where Russia has deployed fighter jets and other weapons in recent weeks. The Federation Council, the upper chamber of the parliament, discussed Putin’s request for the authorization behind closed doors in a debate notable for its speed.

Putin insisted Russia will not send ground troops to Syria and that its role in Syrian army operations will be limited.

“We certainly are not going to plunge head-on into this conflict,” he said. “First, we will be supporting the Syrian army purely in its legitimate fight with terrorist groups. Second, this will be air support without any participation in the ground operations.”

Putin’s strategy in Syria could bring bloody blowback at home, said Andrew Weiss, an analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

“Putin has “basically created a giant recruiting poster for the global jihadist movement. He’s put Moscow on the map for jihadist groups who have been operating in Syria,” Weiss said.

No shutdown: Congress approves funding bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just hours before a midnight deadline, a bitterly divided Congress approved a stopgap spending bill Wednesday to keep the federal government open — but with no assurance there won’t be yet another shutdown showdown in December.

Democrats helped beleaguered House Republican leaders pass the measure by 277-151 — a lopsided vote shrouding deep disagreements within the GOP — after the Senate approved it by a 78-20 tally earlier in the day. The votes sent the bill to President Barack Obama for his signature, but not without White House carping.

“The American people deserve far better than last-minute, short-term legislating,” said spokesman Josh Earnest in pressing for a broader, longer-lasting budget deal.

Approval of such stopgap measures used to be routine, but debate this year exposed acrimonious divisions between pragmatic Republicans such as House Speaker John Boehner and more junior lawmakers in the party’s

tea party wing who are less inclined to compromise. The tea partiers had demanded that the must-pass measure be used to punish Planned Parenthood, stripping it of federal money because of its practice of supplying tissue from aborted fetuses for scientific research.

House Republicans opposed the measure by a clear margin, but Democratic support was unanimous.

The legislation finances the government through Dec. 11, providing 10 weeks to negotiate a more wide-ranging budget deal that would carry past the 2016 presidential election. But the talks promise to be difficult, and success is not assured.

Boehner is resigning from Congress at the end of October, a decision he announced last week after informing Republicans he would not risk a government shutdown over Planned Parenthood.

A similar fight over implementing Obama’s health care law sparked a 16-day shutdown two years ago that Boehner, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell

of Kentucky and other top Republicans did not want to repeat in election season. McConnell is seeking to protect embattled incumbents in Democratic-leaning states such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, while some GOP conservatives are more apt to use the battle to appeal to the party’s core voters on the right.

“Today was a win for the Washington cartel, and another setback for the American people,” said Rep. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, who is using combat with Washington GOP leaders to help define his campaign. “Republican leadership chose to abandon its constitutional power of the purse and to fund 100 percent of President Obama’s failed agenda.”

Support from Democrats also helped power the measure through the Senate, the opposition coming from conservative Republicans.

Longtime lawmakers bemoaned the chronic dysfunction on Capitol Hill and the collapse of the annual appropriations process that is supposed to be wrapped up by now.

Federal health program for 9/11 responders set to expire

WASHINGTON (AP) — A law that provides medical monitoring and treatment for Sept. 11 first responders expires at midnight Wednesday due to the failure of Congress to act.

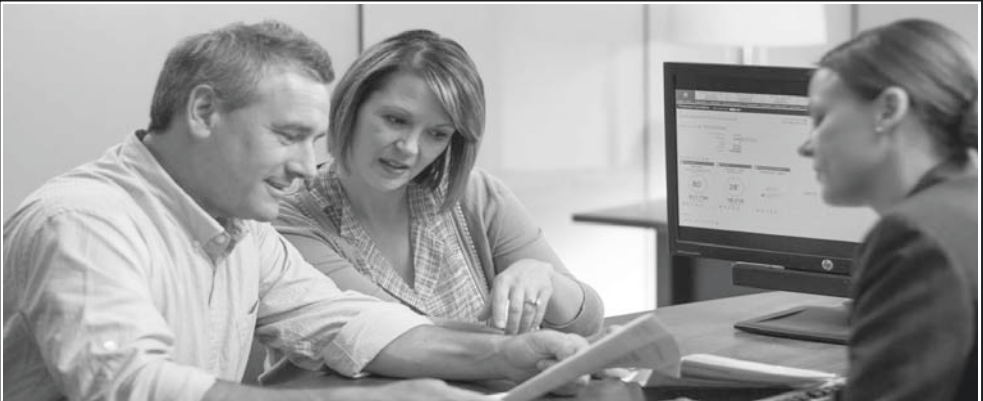
For now, first responders who rushed to the World Trade Center after the 2001 terrorist attacks, worked for weeks and now suffer from illnesses like pulmonary disease and cancers will still be able to get their health care.

But federal officials who administer the program say it will face challenges by February and will have to start shutting down by next summer.

Letting the program expire creates “enormous anxieties and fears in the minds of very sick people,” said Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., who has been lobbying her colleagues to make the program permanent and recently was joined by comedian Jon Stewart.

The Sept. 11 program is one of several that will expire at midnight due to congressional inaction. While Congress moved toward passing legislation to keep government agencies open, there are some programs that depend on further action to operate long-term.

The Zadroga Act, named after a responder who died after working at ground zero, first became law in 2010 after a debate over the bill’s cost.



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