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U.S. blocks UN draft pressing Israel to end attacks

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By Irwin Arief

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - The United States on Thursday blocked a U.N. Security Council statement drafted by Arab nations and aimed at putting pressure on Israel to stop military strikes on Palestinian targets.

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U.S. Ambassador John Bolton said the draft, even after three days of intense negotiations, "was disproportionately critical of Israel, and unfairly so, and needlessly so."

But Palestinian U.N. Observer Riyad Mansour accused Washington of "shielding and protecting Israeli activities and aggression against the Palestinian people."

"It was obvious that many of their concerns were accommodated but yet they kept coming back and coming back for additional things. It was obvious they did not want the Security Council to have a position," Mansour said.

Washington does not have formal veto power when it comes to council statements. But it was nonetheless able to block the draft single-handedly because council rules require that statements be unanimous supported by all 15 of its members.

During Thursday's closed-door negotiations, the United States effectively killed the text by seeking amendment after amendment until Qatar, the council's sole Arab member, gave up the fight.

Asked by reporters to confirm that Washington alone had opposed issuing the statement, Bolton responded, "If I were the only holdout, I'd be proud of that fact."

Qatar, acting on behalf of the Arab group at the United Nations, the 57-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement of 112 nations, immediately requested an open council debate on the Middle East, which was scheduled for Monday afternoon.

"I don't see that that meeting is going to be productive, because I don't think the Security Council is an exercise in group therapy," Bolton said.

But Mansour predicted more than 150 U.N., member-nations would address the meeting, to demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of U.N. members were "on the side of justice and international law."

The draft statement, after three days of revisions aimed at toning it down, expressed grave concern both about rocket attacks on Israel launched from Gaza and the escalation of Israeli shelling of Gaza, which Israeli says was meant to end those attacks.

It urged both sides to comply with international law and to refrain from any steps that could escalate the situation.

It called on the Palestinians "to take a clear public stance against violence and to take firm measures to halt rocket attacks and suicide bombings." And it urged renewed action towards creation of a viable Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

Israel has increased deadly airstrikes and shelling of Gaza in what it says is a response to militants firing rockets into Israel. The attacks have intensified since the militant group Hamas, which is sworn to destroy Israel, took over governing the Palestinian territories after winning a January election.

The Jewish state says it is not intentionally targeting civilians and has warned residents to leave parts of northern Gaza from where militants often launch makeshift rockets.



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