

Russia's U.N. ambassador said he expects this week's gathering of world leaders to be difficult, but asserted that the crisis over Ukraine - which he blamed on the United States - was moving toward a solution.

Vitaly Churkin, the Russian United Nations envoy, did not discuss Western and Ukrainian claims that the Kremlin had deployed its troops and heavy weapons to eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian separatists have been battling to align the region with Russia after the overthrow of former President Viktor Yanukovich after months of protests against his rule. The uprising became bloody when government forces fired on and killed demonstrators who stepped up protests after Yanukovich backed out of a deal for closer economic ties with the European Union and, instead, turned to Russia and its promise of billions of dollars to prop up the country's declining economy.

Yanukovich eventually fled to Russia, saying he feared for his life. That led his supporters, primarily in the Russian-speaking industrial region of eastern Ukraine, to demand that they become part of Russia. It now appears any deal will only give the region greater autonomy. But, in the meantime, thousands have died in fighting as Ukrainian troops have battled to retake rebel held industrial towns in the east. As the fighting has dragged on, despite a cease-fire agreement, Churkin said: "Maybe we are moving toward the end of it, but it's going to be a rough stretch."

He spoke Monday in an interview with The Associated Press at the Russian mission to the United Nations.

The Russian envoy said the key to his optimism was Ukraine's recent signing of an association agreement with the European Union, while putting off making it effective until the beginning of 2016 after "tripartite consultations - Russia, Ukraine and the EU - on the economic consequences of the Ukraine association agreement."

"This is all Russia wanted, and we were telling the EU, the Americans and the Ukrainians this was the only reasonable thing to do because otherwise the Ukrainian economy will collapse," Churkin said.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin had a different view, telling reporters in New York on Monday: "That the U.N. must do more to protect Ukraine's independence. Our key concern is the inability of the U.N. to ensure independent sovereignty and the inviolability of borders," he said, calling for Ukraine to remain high on the international agenda until all Russian troops and heavy weaponry have been removed from Ukrainian territory.

Klimkin said there is no "sustainable bilateral ceasefire" in place, saying that in recent days there have been 50 violations of the latest truce.

Churkin, in blaming the U.S. for the crisis, said he saw the American hand in the stepped up demonstrations that led to Yanukovich's flight to Russia.

"I think there was good reason to believe the United States was behind this more radical version of events. So this is all very unfortunate and provocative. They (the United States) seemed not to care about Ukrainians' stability. They seemed not to care and ignored the reaction that was inevitably coming out of Russia. So this is very unfortunate, very unfortunate."

At the same time, Churkin said, Moscow was eager to work with the United States and get past the imposition of tough economic sanctions against Russia by Washington and EU members.

"For us the threat of terrorism was a major concern which we (Russia, Europe and the United States) will need to face together," he said. "Or let me say this general situation of a major

destabilization in international relations. This is what we need to handle. And in order to handle it we need to work together. In order to work together we need to take into account our (Russia's) interests. And we made it very clear, and it seems it should be obvious to everybody that Ukraine is very important for Russia. It's very sad."

On Russia's insistence that the United States consult with Moscow-backed President Bashar Assad before launching airstrikes against the Islamic State group in Syria, Churkin said there was no need for Washington to talk with the Syrian leader publicly but rather to do that quietly and behind the scenes. President Barack Obama has declared that Assad must leave office in the Syrian civil war that has raged since March 2011. Obama had threatened airstrikes against the Syrian leader after he used chemical weapons on the rebels. He later backed off the attacks when he asked Congress for its approval, which was denied. The White House said it also abandoned plans to take military action after Russia helped broker a deal under which Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons stockpiles.

Hours later, the Pentagon said the U.S. and five Arab nations had begun airstrikes in Syria against Islamic State militants, using a mix of fighter jets, bombers and Tomahawk missiles fired from U.S. ships in the region. Syria's Foreign Ministry said the U.S. informed Syria's envoy to the U.N. about the pending airstrikes, but this report could not immediately be verified with the U.S. side.

The long-term Russian envoy also had advice for American leaders, particularly after the war in Iraq and the threatened strikes against Assad, designed in both cases to move those countries toward democracy.

"Romanticism is not the best guide in foreign policy," he said.--AP