

Le Monde (France)

Avaaz, le trublion de l'humanitaire, passe à l'offensive contre le régime syrien

L'ONG a joué un rôle dans la libération des journalistes occidentaux, mais ses méthodes sont critiquées

Dans la lente et périlleuse opération qui a permis d'extraire, fin février, les quatre journalistes occidentaux bloqués à Homs, au centre de la Syrie, une ONG encore méconnue en France a joué un rôle non négligeable. Il s'agit d'Avaaz – un terme farsi qui signifie « voix » – un mouvement citoyen, basé à New York, qui utilise la puissance de feu de l'Internet pour monter des campagnes de lobbying gigantesques à travers le monde.

Fondée en 2007 par des anciens de MoveOn.org, une association de mobilisation en ligne qui avait contribué à l'élection de Barack Obama en 2008, Avaaz s'est investie ces dernières années dans des causes aussi diverses que la lutte contre le réchauffement climatique, la défense de l'opposition birmane ou le soutien aux militants anticorruption en Inde. Au printemps 2011, l'organisation qui s'enorgueillit d'avoir la plus vaste liste de diffusion au monde (13,6 millions d'abonnés) et qui prétend être financée exclusivement par des donations individuelles, s'est aventurée sur le champ de mines syrien. Grâce à un vaste éventail de contacts en Syrie, actionnés depuis Beyrouth par Wissam Tarif, une figure du mouvement de défense des droits de l'homme libanais, Avaaz a mis en place des filières de soutien aux opposants à Bachar Al-Assad.

Ces réseaux clandestins ont servi à acheminer du matériel médical jusque dans les cliniques de fortune gérées par les insurgés, ainsi qu'à équiper des dizaines d'entre eux en matériel d'enregistrement et de transmission. Les images qu'ils tourment et qu'ils téléchargent ensuite sur Internet font partie de ce flot de vidéos, souvent floues et tremblées, qui sont diffusées par les chaînes de télévision occidentales, décriées par le pouvoir syrien. « Nous voulons casser le black-out médiatique imposé par le régime syrien », dit Ricken Patel, le patron d'Avaaz et l'un de ses fondateurs, un trentenaire anglo-canadien, joint par téléphone à New York. « Ces images sont comme un ballon d'oxygène qui permet au soulèvement syrien de perdurer. »

Après avoir aidé une trentaine de journalistes à s'infiltrer en Syrie, Avaaz a contribué à des degrés divers à l'évacuation du photographe britannique Paul Conroy, du reporter d'*El Mundo* Javier Espinosa ainsi qu'à la sortie d'Edith Bouvier et de William Daniels, les deux journalistes français arrivés à Paris vendredi 2 mars. « Nous avons fait passer des messages et offert de l'aide, nous n'avons jamais pris de décision », affirme Ricken Patel, visiblement soucieux de ne pas s'arroger tout

le mérite de ces opérations. Un communiqué publié dans la foulée de l'exfiltration de M. Conroy, qui affirmait qu'Avaaz avait « coordonné » son sauvetage, avait suscité des remous au sein des mouvements d'opposition syriens, qui étaient eux aussi à la manœuvre. « Avaaz a beaucoup aidé, mais ils ne sont pas partout », dit Javier Espinosa, joint à Beyrouth.

Non content d'agir sur le terrain humanitaire et médiatique, Avaaz revendique désormais un rôle ouvertement politique. Vendredi 24 février, ses émissaires étaient à Tunis à la réunion inaugurale du groupe des Amis de la Syrie, une coalition de pays à la pointe de la lutte contre le régime de Bachar Al-Assad. « Nous sommes appelés presque tous les jours par des diplomates qui cherchent à avoir des infos sur ce qui se passe sur le terrain », dit Ricken Patel.

Le programme d'Avaaz ? « Reconnaître le Conseil national syrien [la principale plate-forme

d'opposition], comme le représentant légitime du peuple syrien », ce qui impliquerait la rupture des derniers liens diplomatiques avec Damas ; « durcir les sanctions » contre le régime, au risque de pénaliser aussi la population et « instaurer une zone de sécurité pour les civils », ce qui supposerait, même si Avaaz ne le mentionne pas, une

« Ils sont dans une logique de croisade, avec une approche très simpliste de la crise », dit un bon connaisseur de la Syrie

forme d'intervention militaire étrangère en Syrie.

Avec un positionnement aussi offensif, qui rompt avec la retenue traditionnelle des ONG, le nouveau venu ne s'est pas fait que des amis. « Ils ont un style un peu cow-

boy, dit un militant des droits de l'homme libanais. Le nombre des morts qu'ils avancent est souvent invérifiable. La documentation n'est pas leur point fort. » « Ils sont dans une logique de croisade, avec une approche très simpliste de la crise, dit un bon connaisseur de la Syrie. Ils risquent de causer beaucoup de mal aux autres ONG. »

Ricken Patel veut ignorer ces critiques, symptomatiques selon lui de « la vieille société civile, bureaucratique et allergique aux risques ». « La plupart des grosses ONG ont refusé de violer la loi syrienne, ce qui les a rendues inutilisables pour le peuple syrien, accuse-t-il. Certaines d'entre elles nous ont discrètement demandé d'achever leur aide. » Il entend rester fidèle au slogan plein de panache et de candeur qui est celui d'Avaaz : « Réduire l'écart entre le monde tel qu'il est et tel que la plupart des gens voudraient qu'il soit. » ■

BENJAMIN BARTHE
ET LAURE STEPHAN (À BEYROUTH)



Une manifestation organisée par l'ONG Avaaz devant le siège des Nations unies, à New York, le 24 février, pour protester contre le soutien apporté par Moscou au régime de Damas. BRIAN ACH/AP

Kofi Annan à Damas pour l'opération de la « dernière chance »

New York (Nations unies)
Correspondante

LES DIPLOMATES sont nombreux à en parler comme de « *la tentative diplomatique de la dernière chance* ». Quelques heures avant que l'émissaire spécial de l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe pour la Syrie, Kofi Annan, n'entame sa mission, samedi 10 mars à Damas, l'humeur au siège des Nations unies était à l'optimisme prudent. L'initiative de paix de la Ligue arabe n'ayant pas recueilli le consensus de la communauté internationale – les vetos russe et chinois l'ont démontré –, « *la médiation de Kofi Annan est aujourd'hui la seule carte que nous pouvons jouer, nous n'avons pas le choix* », fait remarquer une source proche du dossier.

Lors de sa visite de quarante-

huit heures à Damas, l'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU devait rencontrer le président syrien, Bachar Al-Assad, des responsables gouvernementaux et de la société civile locale. Ses entretiens avec des dirigeants de l'opposition sont prévus en dehors de la Syrie. Selon son successeur, Ban Ki-moon, les « *trois priorités* » de sa mission sont : un « *cessez-le-feu immédiat* », « *une solution politique globale* », et « *l'accès et l'aide humanitaires* ».

Le diplomate ghanéen de 73 ans dispose de « *deux atouts majeurs* », estime Bruce Jones, spécialiste de l'ONU et de la sécurité internationale à la Brookings Institution : il entretient depuis ses deux mandats à la tête des Nations unies (1997-2006), des « *liens étroits* » avec le ministre des affaires étran-

gères russe, Sergueï Lavrov, avec lequel il devait d'ailleurs s'entretenir au Caire avant son arrivée à Damas, et il est « *fortement soutenu par les Etats-Unis* ». A New York, les discussions sur un projet américain de résolution à portée humanitaire ont tourné court, la Russie le jugeant « *déséquilibré* ».

Assauts

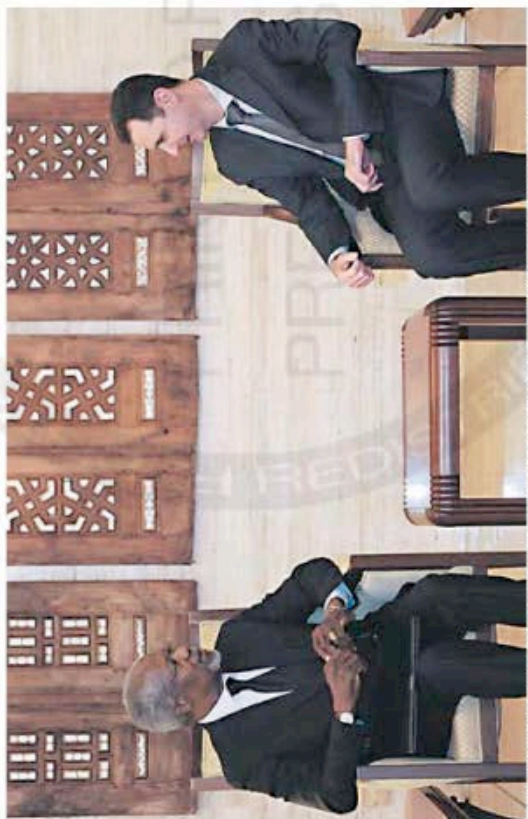
La Syrie sera au centre des discussions du Conseil de sécurité lundi, qui doit tenir une réunion ministérielle sur « *les défis et les opportunités* » du « *printemps arabe* ». Ces tractations interviennent alors que les forces de sécurité syennes ont lancé, vendredi, plusieurs assauts contre des régions rebelles, tuant près de 50 civils, en majorité à Idlib. A la frontière turco-syrienne, les réfugiés

affluent. Environ 1 000 Syriens sont arrivés par les montagnes cette semaine, faisant passer le nombre de réfugiés en Turquie à environ 12 000. Parmi eux figurent des éléments de l'Armée syrienne libre. Dans le camp d'Apaydin, tenu au secret par l'armée turque, se trouvent des déserteurs et leurs familles. Le nombre de militaires de haut rang présents varie selon les sources. On parle de 4 à 6 généraux et d'une quinzaine d'officiers. Après sa mission en Syrie, Kofi Annan doit se rendre dans d'autres pays de la région et notamment en Turquie, où il visitera les camps de réfugiés. Selon l'ONU, plus de 25 000 Syriens ont été recensés dans les pays voisins de la Syrie. ■

ALEXANDRA GENESTE
(AVEC GUILLAUME PERRIER
À ISTANBUL)

Syrie 62 morts lors d'une offensive pour écraser la rébellion, alors que l'émissaire de l'ONU était enfin reçu à Damas

Bachar joue la montre avec Kofi Annan



N'ayant pas trouvé d'accord hier, à Damas, Kofi Annan et Bashar El-Assad doivent se revoir aujourd'hui. AFP

Nations unies, à New York (États-Unis)
Correspondance
Alexandra Geneste

Le tête-à-tête le plus désespéré du moment s'est conclu par une rebuffade. L'ancien secrétaire général de l'ONU et Prix Nobel de la paix, Kofi Annan, risque de quitter Damas, ce dimanche, sans l'ombre d'un accord, après son entretien d'hier avec le président Bachar El-Assad, accusé de « génocide » par le Qatar. À l'émissaire de

l'ONU et de la Ligue arabe mandaté pour obtenir l'arrêt des violences, qui ont fait plus de 8.500 morts depuis un an, le dictateur a répondu qu'il était favorable à « tout effort sincère » pour résoudre la crise.

Mais il a averti qu'aucun dialogue ou processus politique ne pourra réussir « tant qu'il y a des groupes terroristes qui œuvrent pour semer le chaos ». Une nouvelle rencontre entre les deux hommes était toutefois prévue aujourd'hui. Selon l'ONU, Kofi

Annan, qui a qualifié cet entretien de « franc et complet », a fait part de sa « profonde préoccupation » au leader syrien et lui a soumis « plusieurs propositions » pour stopper la violence.

« Annan travaille dans un mouchoir de poche »

Chargé de négocier un « cessez-le-feu immédiat », une « solution politique globale » et « l'accès et l'aide humanitaires », le diplomateghanéen s'est aussi entretenu avec l'opposition, qui refuse

toute négociation tant que « les massacres de civils » se poursuivent. Mais le médiateur aguerri de 73 ans n'est pas du genre à se laisser dissuader par ce qui s'apparente à une « impasse ». « Kofi Annan travaille dans un mouchoir de poche », insiste un diplomate. Cette mission

« de haute volée » se « déroulera en plusieurs étapes », estime Bruce Jones, spécialiste de l'ONU à la Brookings Institution. La clé du succès, selon lui, est de convaincre la Russie de jouer de son in-

fluence auprès de Damas. Or « Moscou a toutes les raisons de soutenir Kofi Annan, car une médiation onusienne lui permet d'être partie prenante des négociations, a contrario d'une initiative menée par l'Otan et les Américains ou par des pays du Golfe ».

Lors d'une réunion au Caire, Russes et Arabes ont d'ailleurs fait part de leur soutien à l'émissaire international et appelé à « la fin de la violence d'où qu'elle vienne ». Moscou a toutefois rejeté un projet de résolu-

tion américain qui exige le départ des militaires des villes, arguant que ce retrait ne peut avoir lieu avant celui des groupes armés. Les Occidentaux espéraient soumettre ce texte demain au vote en marge d'une réunion ministérielle prévue de longue date au Conseil de sécurité, en présence de nombreux chefs de la diplomatie, dont Sergueï Lavrov, Hillary Clinton et Alain Juppé. Sujet du débat, sans ironie aucune : « leçons et opportunités » du printemps arabe. ●

Der Tagesspiegel (Allemagne / Germany)

Neue Angriffe in Syrien während Annan-Besuch

EU hofft auf Einlenken Moskaus im Sicherheitsrat

KAIRO/KOPENHAGEN - Trotz des Besuchs des UN-Sondergesandten Kofi Annan in Syrien haben Regierungstruppen am Samstag einen neuen Angriff auf die nördliche Region Idlib gestartet. Die Militäraktion weckte Befürchtungen, das Regime von Präsident Baschar Assad plane eine ähnliche Offensive wie im Februar gegen die weiter südlich gelegene Protesthochburg Homs. Offenbar flohen bereits viele Familien aus der Stadt Idlib. Regierungstruppen töteten laut Aktivisten 16 bewaffnete Kämpfer der Opposition, die auf dem Weg nach Idlib waren.

Am Morgen hatte der frühere UN-Generalsekretär Annan Assad in Damaskus getroffen. Laut amtlicher Nachrichtenagentur Sana sagte Assad, jeglicher Dialog sei zum Scheitern verurteilt, „so lange es bewaffnete Terrorgruppen gibt, die darauf hinarbeiten, Anarchie zu verbreiten und das Land zu destabilisieren“. Auch die syrische Opposition hat einen Dialog bereits als sinnlos und realitätsfern zurückgewiesen. Annan zeigte sich nach dem Treffen „tief besorgt“.

Die EU-Staaten sehen Sanktionen als ihr einziges Druckmittel gegen das Vorgehen von Assad. Kein EU-Land halte ein militärisches Eingreifen für einen gangbaren Weg, sagte Dänemarks Außenminister Villy Søvndal in Kopenhagen nach ei-

nem Treffen der EU-Außenminister. Die EU-Außenbeauftragte Catherine Ashton kündigte eine weitere Verschärfung der Sanktionen an, die das nächste Ministertreffen am 23. März beschließen könnte. Gegen Syrien besteht ein Öl- und Waffenembargo, Mitglieder der Führung dürfen weder in die EU einreisen noch haben sie Zugang zu ihren Vermögen in Europa. Zuletzt wurde beschlossen, einen Teil der Konten der syrischen Zentralbank einzufrieren sowie Frachtflüge nach Europa zu untersagen. Nun sind Streichungen im zivilen Flug- sowie eine Einschränkung des Schiffsverkehrs im Gespräch.

Am Montag wollen die Europäer im UN-Sicherheitsrat erneut auf Russland und China einwirken, ihr Veto gegen eine Syrien-Resolution aufzugeben. Berlin hält nach der Präsidentenwahl in Russland ein Umdenken der Regierung für möglich. Außenminister Sergej Lawrow, der am Montag in New York erwartet wird, verteidigte bei einem Treffen der Arabischen Liga Moskaus Haltung. Sein Land schütze kein Regime, sondern das internationale Recht, sagte er in Kairo. Der Ministerpräsident von Katar, Scheik Hamad bin Jassem Al Thani, sprach hingegen von einem „systematischen Völkermord durch die syrische Regierung“. Eine Waffenruhe allein sei keine Lösung. *dapd/rtr*

Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag (Suisse / Switzerland)

Asad zeigt Annan die kalte Schulter

Der syrische Despot denunziert die Regimegegner weiterhin als Terroristen

In Syrien ist kein Frieden in Sicht: Der ehemalige Uno-Generalsekretär Kofi Annan ist mit seinen Bemühungen um eine Waffenruhe abgeblitzt.

Inga Rogg, Bagdad

Die diplomatischen Bemühungen um eine Beilegung des Konflikts in Syrien haben gestern Samstag einen weiteren Rückschlag erlitten. Gegenüber dem ehemaligen Uno-Generalsekretär Kofi Annan lehnte Staatschef Bashar

al-Asad Verhandlungen mit der Opposition ab. Gleichzeitig verstärkte die Armee ihre Angriffe auf die Rebellenhochburg Idlib im Nordwesten des Landes.

Annan traf am Samstag in Damaskus ein, um als Sondergesandter der Uno und der Arabischen Liga in dem eskalierenden Konflikt zu vermitteln. Ausser einer sofortigen Feuerpause, die den Weg für Gespräche ebnen soll, wollte Annan auch den Zugang von Hilfsorganisationen zu den Notleidenden erreichen. Staatliche Medien berichteten nach der Unterredung von

einer «positiven Atmosphäre». Er unterstützte «jede aufrichtige Bemühung um eine Lösung», habe Asad seinem Gast gesagt. In der Sache blieb der Despot freilich hart. Wie seit Beginn der Revolte vor einem Jahr denunzierte er die Regimegegner als Terroristen. Die geforderte Waffenruhe lehnte er rundweg ab. «Solange bewaffnete Terrorgruppen für Chaos und Instabilität sorgen, hat kein politischer Dialog Aussicht auf Erfolg», sagte Asad laut der staatlichen Nachrichtenagentur Sana. Annan, der sich vor seiner Abreise am Sonntag mit Oppositionellen

treffen wollte, gab zunächst keine Stellungnahme ab.

Ebenfalls gescheitert sind am Samstag die Bemühungen der Arabischen Liga, Russland von seinem Pro-Asad-Kurs abzubringen. An einem Treffen der Liga in Kairo verteidigte der russische Ausserminister Sergei Lawrow die Blockadehaltung seines Landes. Gemeinsam mit China hatte Russland diese Woche im Uno-Sicherheitsrat bereits gegen die dritte Resolution, die ein Ende der Gewalt fordert, sein Veto eingelegt. In einer hitzigen Debatte wehrte sich Lawrow gegen die Vorwürfe, Russland schütze das Asad-Regime. Russland gehe es nicht um einen «besonderen Preis oder geopolitische Interessen», sagte Lawrow. Vielmehr schütze es das internationale Recht. Russland wolle mit allen Mitteln eine militärische Intervention wie in Libyen vor einem Jahr verhindern. Es schütze kein Regime, sagte Lawrow.

Die Vertreter von Saudi Arabien und Katar, die gemeinsam die Speerspitze gegen das Asad-Regime bilden, kritisierten Lawrow scharf. Der saudische Ausserminister Prinz Saud al-Faisal nannte die russische Haltung eine «Lizenz für das brutale Vorgehen gegen das syrische Volk». Die Zeit der leeren Resolutionen und rückgratlosen Hal-tungen müsse ein Ende haben. Katar forderte die Entsendung von arabischen und internationalen Truppen. «Es ist eine moralische und humanitäre Pflicht, das tägliche systematische Töten zu beenden», sagte Katars Ausserminister Hamad al-Thani.

Die Bemühungen um eine Lösung des Konflikts werden durch die Spaltung innerhalb der Opposition erschwert. Derweil weiteten die Regierungstruppen ihre Offensive gegen die Aufständischen in Idlib aus. Aktivisten aus der belagerten Stadt berichteten von schwerem Artilleriebeschuss und vielen Verletzten.



Die Distanz konnte nicht überwunden werden: Kofi Annan und Bashar al-Asad beim Gespräch in Damaskus. (10. März 2012)

Kofi Annan in Siria con la benedizione di Russia e Cina

L'ex leader Onu vede Assad: serve subito un cessate il fuoco

Retrosцена
MAURIZIO MOLINARI
CORRISPONDENTE DA NEW YORK

Con un difficile colloquio di 35 minuti nel palazzo presidenziale di Damasco Kofi Annan torna sotto i riflettori internazionali a oltre cinque anni di distanza dall'addio al segretario generale dell'Onu. A richiamarlo in servizio, il 23 febbraio, è stato il successore Ban Ki-moon assegnandogli l'incarico più difficile: fermare in Siria un bagno di sangue di civili che evoca nella memoria collettiva le stragi avvenute nei Balcani nella prima metà degli Anni Novanta.

Con il Consiglio di Sicurezza paralizzato dal veto di Mosca e Pechino contro ogni decisione punitiva nei confronti del regime di Bashar

Assad, Ban ha scelto d'intesa con la Lega Araba di affidare ad Annan, 73 anni, la carica di «inviato sulla Siria»

scommettendo sulla sua esperienza e credibilità per bloccare le stragi e aprire la strada alla transizione. Da qui l'arrivo a Damasco, che Annan ha preparato in una cornice tesa a trovare l'assenso anzitutto della Russia e anche di Cina. A dimostrarlo è l'agenda della missione: Annan si è fat-

to portatore con Assad dell'unica richiesta di un «immediato cessate il fuoco» evitando di parlare di transizione e andando incontro alla richiesta di Mosca di pretendere la fine degli attacchi anche dall'opposizione armata. Inoltre, l'incontro con Assad - nella giornata in cui Damasco ha intensificato gli attacchi sulla città di Idlib (l'opposizione denuncia 31 vittime) - è avvenuto in contemporanea con il summit mini-steriali Lega Araba-Russia al Cairo per allontanare i sospetti del Cremlino di un disegno occidentale ostile. «Il primo compito di Annan è recuperare la Russia» osserva una fonte diplomatica al Palazzo di Vetro, sottolineando come l'ex segretario generale ha una consolidata amicizia con

LA MISSIONE

L'inviato di Ban Ki-moon non parla di transizione di poteri. A Idlib 31 morti

che «non vogliamo proteggere il regime di Assad bensì il diritto internazionale» ma le posizioni restano distanti, consentendo al dittatore siriano di avere ampi margini di manovra. «Non vi sarà alcun cessate il fuoco fino a quando i gruppi terroristi continueranno ad operare» ha detto Assad ad Annan, con l'effetto di far

l'attuale ministro degli Esteri russo Sergei Lavrov, con cui condivise l'opposizione all'intervento Usa in Iraq durante la battaglia al Consiglio di Sicurezza fra il 2002 e il 2003. Nel tentativo di sostenere la missione di Annan, si è mosso il presidente Usa Barack Obama, telefonando venerdì al rieleto collega russo Vladimir Putin, per discutere un'agenda di cooperazione, dall'Iran al G8, che vertice attorno alla necessità di superare in fretta i disaccordi sulla Siria. Lavrov dal Cairo ha mandato un timido segnale affermando che «non vogliamo proteggere il regime di Assad bensì il diritto internazionale» ma le posizioni restano distanti, consentendo al dittatore siriano di avere ampi margini di manovra. «Non vi sarà alcun cessate il fuoco fino a quando i gruppi terroristi continueranno ad operare» ha detto Assad ad Annan, con l'effetto di far

crescere i timori di Ban su un'offensiva contro i civili in più località dopo le stragi di Homs che hanno portato il bilancio della repressione oltre le 7500 vittime. Oggi Annan vedrà alcuni leader dell'opposizione siriana ma i suoi margini di manovra sembrano assai ristretti anche perché, secondo un rapporto di intelligence Usa fatto filtrare sui network tv, i comandi militari e dei servizi di sicurezza siriani sono ancora uniti nel sostenere il regime rendendone possibile la sopravvivenza «per alcuni mesi se non per un periodo più lungo». Ciò significa che Annan ha di fronte una missione destinata a durare, consentendogli di tornare protagonista anche se le grandi potenze hanno un ruolo invertito rispetto al 2003 perché all'epoca ad essere isolati erano gli Usa di Bush mentre ora in questa posizione c'è la Russia di Putin.

Otra reunión, otro plan para Siria y 62 muertos más

La represión continúa el mismo día en que Kofi Annan se encuentra con Asad

ISABEL MUNERA
 Condenas, reuniones, entrevistas, planes de paz y una única certeza: Assad sigue matando. Ni siquiera la visita del enviado especial de la Liga Árabe y Naciones Unidas Kofi Annan a Damasco sirvió para detener ayer la negra estadística del régimen. Mientras en el despacho Bashar Assad prometía a Annan «un esfuerzo sincero» para poner fin al conflicto; en la calle sus hombres imponían la ley del más fuerte un día más. Al menos 62 personas perdieron la vida en una nueva ofensiva puesta en marcha por el régimen en distintas partes del país.

El presidente sirio prosigue aferrado a su discurso y, durante la reunión que mantuvo con el ex secretario general de la ONU, volvió a insistir en que «ningún diálogo o proceso político tendrá éxito mientras haya grupos terroristas armados trabajando para sembrar el caos y desestabilizar el país», informa Efe.

Parece difícil que Annan pueda cumplir con el objetivo de su viaje, que no era otro que organizar un diálogo entre el Gobierno sirio y la oposición, mientras continúe

la represión y los enfrentamientos entre las fuerzas leales al régimen y sus detractores.

Y si el encuentro de Kofi Annan con Bashar Assad no fue todo lo fructífero que el primero pretendía, en la reunión en El Cairo entre los ministros de Exteriores de la Liga Árabe y su colega ruso no se dieron tampoco grandes avances. Al término del encuentro, el secretario general de es-

Rusia presenta un plan que pide el cese de la violencia «sea cual sea su origen»

ta organización, Nabil Arabi, anunció que presentará a ante el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU el plan acordado ayer con Rusia. Una propuesta que no va, sin embargo, mucho más allá de lo defendido por los rusos en otras ocasiones: el cese de la violencia «sea cual sea su origen».

Aunque los ministros calificaron la masacre cometida en el bastión

rebelle de Homs, Bab Amro, de crimen contra la humanidad y exigieron que sus responsables sean llevados ante la justicia, el acuerdo final no contempló esta iniciativa.

Sin duda, uno de los países árabes más beligerantes con Assad fue Qatar, que insistió en la necesidad de enviar una fuerza de paz árabe e internacional para poner fin a un conflicto que dura ya demasado tiempo y ha dejado por el camino miles de muertos. Además, el primer ministro qatari, el je que Hamad bin Yasim al Thani, se mostró partidario de reconocer al opositor Consejo Nacional Sirio como único representante legítimo.

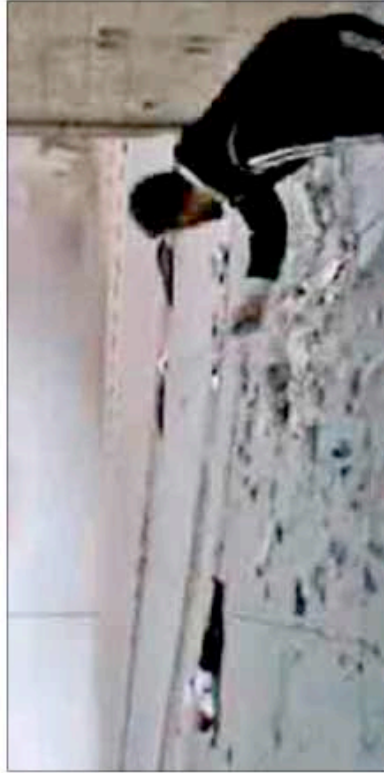
No obstante, en el plan que presentó ayer no figura ninguna propuesta que suponga sentir en el bastión a los responsables de la represión. Lo que sí recoge es la creación de un mecanismo neutral para supervisar el alto el fuego e insistió en las catastróficas consecuencias de una intervención extranjera. Además, propuso la llegada de ayuda humanitaria «sin

obstáculos» y apoyar la misión del enviado especial de la ONU y la Liga Árabe para que se pueda alcanzar una solución negociada entre el régimen y la oposición.

Rusia no parece dispuesta a aceptar otras medidas que no sigan esta línea y, por eso, ha decidido presentar su propio plan. De hecho, rechazó el pasado 22 de enero una parte de la propuesta presentada por la Liga Árabe, que defendía que Assad cediera el poder a su vicepresidente, y ha vetado junto a China demandas explícitas al régimen en el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU. Además, y aunque Pekín dio a conocer

preconcebidas que difunden «algunos países con la intención de tergiversar los hechos y presentar una imagen distinta de lo que ocurre en Siria», informa Reuters.

Pero mientras el conflicto se discute en los despachos, la diáspora de un pueblo cansado de convivir diariamente con la muerte continúa. Más de 7.000 sirios han cruzado ya la frontera hacia el Líbano huyendo de la represión desde que comenzó la revuelta popular hace un año, según datos del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados. Han dejado atrás a su familia y a sus amigos, sus hogares y



Un hombre intenta, ayer, auxiliar a un herido en el barrio de Karam al Zaitoun en Homs (Siria). / AFP

esta misma semana un plan muy similar que Damasco aceptó, Moscú ha preferido ponerse al frente de una nueva iniciativa para tratar de desencallar la crisis siria.

Asad también quiso aportar ayer su granito de arena para poner fin al conflicto y pidió al enviado de la ONU que conozca la situación sobre el terreno y acabe con las ideas

que no ha hecho más que empezar.

que no ha hecho más que empezar.

Asad cierra la puerta del diálogo ante Kofi Annan

Dice que los «terroristas» bloquean una salida, mientras sigue su ofensiva

Francesca Cicardi
Corresponsal en el Mundo Árabe

EL CAIRO. El recién designado enviado conjunto de la ONU y la Liga Árabe en Siria, Kofi Annan, llegaba ayer a Damasco en su primera misión para pedir por enésima vez un alto el fuego que parece muy poco probable. El día anterior, Annan había hablado en El Cairo de diálogo entre el régimen de Bachar al Asad y los rebeldes, pero el propio presidente sirio le decía ayer en Damasco que «no puede haber ningún proceso político o diálogo mientras haya grupos terroristas armados que trabajan para expandir el caos y desestabi-

lizar el país, atacando tanto a civiles como a militares», según la agencia estatal de noticias Sana.

La misión de Annan se presenta más imposible que nunca e, incluso, una pérdida de tiempo, tal y como la calificó el líder del Consejo Nacional Sirio, Burham Ghaliun. Para los sirios, cada día cuenta: ayer otras 30 personas fallecieron, al menos 7.500 habrían muerto desde el comienzo de la revuelta de la que se cumple un año la próxima semana.

El Ejército de Asad lanzó ayer a primera hora de la mañana un ataque contra la ciudad de Idlib, en el norte del país, que se ha conver-



FRACASO DE LA ONU. El «rais» sirio dijo al enviado especial de la ONU, Kofi Annan, que no habrá diálogo «mientras haya grupos terroristas»

tido en uno de los bastiones del Ejército Libre de Siria. Según los Comités de Coordinación Locales, las tropas gubernamentales ejecutaron a 16 militares rebeldes en esta ciudad a pesar de la presencia de Annan en la capital y de las promesas de Asad de «buscar una solución».

Mientras, en El Cairo, la Liga Árabe se reúne de nuevo para seguir buscando soluciones. Los ministros de Asuntos Exteriores árabes recibían a su homólogo

ruso, Sergei Lavrov, que calificó el plan de paz diseñado como «totalmente irreal». Todos juntos consiguieron acordar un nuevo plan de 5 puntos, que podría servir de base para una nueva resolución de la ONU que Rusia y China no veten. La Liga Árabe habría intentado suavizar la postura de Rusia, pero fue Lavrov el que finalmente consiguió que el organismo rebaje el tono, después de que Qatar y Arabia Saudí volvieran a pedir en la reunión de ayer que se envíen ar-

mas y tropas a Siria para ayudar a los rebeldes. En el texto acordado se pide el cese de la violencia «cualquiera sea su origen», lo cual resta legitimidad a la resistencia armada de los rebeldes. Lavrov aseguró que Rusia no «está defendiendo a ningún régimen en Oriente Medio», pero se opone a cualquier «interferencia» en los asuntos internos de otros países, y lanzó una amenaza velada a los del Golfo Pérsico, que han aplastado sus propias revoluciones democráticas.

El Asad rechaza la petición de Annan de dialogar con los rebeldes

Ni la oposición ni el dictador sirio dan margen al enviado especial de la ONU

TOMÁS ALCOVERRO
Beirut. Corresponsal

La situación de Siria parece cada vez más a la que prevaleció en Irak en 1990, durante las inútiles tentativas diplomáticas para evitar la guerra. Kofi Annan en su misión imposible, auspiciada por la ONU y por la Liga Árabe, de conseguir un cese de hostilidades entre el ejército y los insurrectos, y promover un diálogo nacional, se entrevistó ayer más de dos horas en Damasco con el rais Bashar el Asad antes de poderlo hacer con dirigentes de la oposición.

El presidente de Siria fue contundente al afirmar que no negociará con "grupos armados terroristas que siembran el caos y la inestabilidad", pero dijo que apoya "todos los esfuerzos honestos a fin de encontrar una solución". La misión de Annan ya ha sido descalificada por Barman Gallon jefe del Consejo Nacional Sirio en el exilio, que considera que se trata de una pérdida de tiempo si no va a la par de una acción militar contra El Asad.

Ninguno de los bandos beligerantes ha hecho ges to alguno para tener en cuenta los buenos oficios del ex secretario general de



El presidente sirio, Bashar el Asad (derecha), recibió a Kofi Annan, enviado de la ONU ante Siria

la ONU. La oposición ya expresó su indignado talante cuando Kofi Annan se manifestó en El Cairo en contra de los planes de militarización de grupos insurrectos, de armarlos y financiarlos desde el extranjero, advirtiendo que fomentarían la guerra civil.

Se da por sentado que, dada la

cohesión del ejército, de los servicios de inteligencia y el apoyo con que cuenta el régimen de parte de la población, sólo es posible derrocar a El Asad con una intervención militar extranjera. Si Ben Ali y Mubarak fueron derribados por la fuerza interior, Gaddafi de Libia no hubiese sido de-

húsan dialogar con el régimen es porque no han logrado acordar un programa común de acción.

Durante la visita de Annan ha continuado el asalto de los militares sirios sobre Idlib, donde el Ejército Libre sirio sigue combatiendo, y en Homs aún hay desplazados. La responsable de Asuntos Humanitarios de la ONU, Valerie Amos, sólo ha logrado "limitados progresos" para la asistencia internacional a las poblaciones afectadas.

En una reunión de ministros de Asuntos Exteriores árabes en El Cairo, el jefe de la diplomacia de Rusia, valedora del régimen en su alianza desde hace décadas, explicó su postura contraria

El rais recalca su negativa a negociar con "grupos armados terroristas que siembran el caos"

al uso de la fuerza en Siria, a fin de no alentar todavía más este conflicto de gran complejidad internacional. Ya desde antes del comunismo, Rusia protegía las comunidades ortodoxas de los pueblos del Oriente Medio, como la siria o libanesa, que ahora se sienten amenazadas con las insurrecciones árabes.

La responsable de Asuntos Humanitarios de la ONU, Valerie Amos, sólo ha logrado "limitados progresos" para dar asistencia internacional a las poblaciones más afectadas en esta guerra, que avanza irremisiblemente. ●

ABC (Espagne / Spain)

SIRIA

Assad recibe a Kofi Annan sin dejar de asediar y matar a la población

ABC
MADRID

El enviado especial de la ONU y la Liga Árabe para Siria, Kofi Annan, es testigo en Damasco de lo complicado que va a ser frenar las matanzas ordenadas por el régimen en ese país, que han seguido su curso durante su viaje. Annan fue recibido ayer por el presidente Bashar Al Assad, que le dijo que no tiene intención ninguna de sentarse a negociar con los opositores, a los que sigue considerando «terroristas».

«No puede haber diálogo o actividades políticas mientras haya grupos terroristas armados operando y extendiendo el caos y la inestabilidad», dijo el presidente al enviado de la ONU, según la agencia oficial Sana. Era la forma de dar a entender a la comunidad internacional que la repersión ordenada por el propio Assad va a seguir adelante sin importar que sean ya más de 7.500 personas las que han muerto en el último año de revueltas.

Efectivamente, mientras ambos se reunían en la capital, el Ejército seguía adelante con su ofensiva en los bastiones rebeldes del norte del país. Los activistas denuncian que los tanques del régimen han tomado ya Idlib tras el asalto la semana pasada a Homs.

Frente a China y Rusia, principales valedores de Damasco en la escena internacional, regímenes autócratas como Arabia Saudí o Qatar se alzan cada vez más en paladines de la democracia y defienden el rearme de la guerrilla para, como ocurrió en Libia, poder desde fuera ayudar a poner fin a un régimen que la familia Assad mantiene desde hace tres décadas.

Assad ataca bastião rebelde enquanto dialoga com Annan

Síria. Líder sírio mandou executar uma operação militar contra Idleb e, ao mesmo tempo, falou com o enviado da ONU e da Liga Árabe

LUÍS NAVES

O exército sírio atacou ontem a cidade de Idleb, controlada pelos rebeldes, num assalto que terá feito pelo menos 14 mortos, segundo denunciou o presidente do Observatório Sírio dos Direitos do Homem, Rami Abdel Rahmame, citado pela AFP.

A acusação deste responsável coincide com o relato de testemunhas que referem a ocorrência de bombardeamentos indiscriminados de áreas civis e ataques em vários eixos. Há também informações, em Damasco, de que uma coluna rebelde proveniente da Turquia foi emboscada com êxito pelas forças militares sírias.

A ofensiva sobre Idleb, junto à fronteira com a Turquia, repete o

padrão do que aconteceu em Homs, no mês passado. Desta vez, a violência foi desencadeada exatamente na mesma altura em que a comunidade internacional tentava proceder a uma mediação diplomática com o regime.

O enviado especial da ONU e da Liga Árabe a Damasco, Kofi Annan, foi ontem recebido pelo Presidente sírio, Bachar al-Assad, na qual que a televisão oficial descreveu como "encontro positivo".

Mas Assad parece pouco aberto a negociar. O Presidente classificou os rebeldes de "grupos terroristas" e disse poder apoiar uma eventual solução, mas só se os adversários do regime não fossem considerados. "Qualquer diálogo ou processo político não pode resultar enquanto houver grupos terroristas que semeiam o caos e a

desestabilização, atacando civis e militares", disse Bachar al-Assad.

Por sua vez, o ex-secretário-geral da ONU, um dos diplomatas mundiais mais experientes, transmitiu ao Presidente sírio a sua "profunda preocupação". Mandado pela ONU e pela Liga Árabe, Annan foi a Damasco para tentar negociar uma solução para o conflito, que já provocou pelo menos 8400 mortos.

Enquanto decorria o encontro entre o mediador e o Presidente, tropas leais ao regime de Bachar al-Assad atacavam várias zonas controladas pelos rebeldes sírios. Ontem, morreram pelo menos 72 pessoas em diferentes confrontos. Os bombardeamentos em Homs prosseguem, mas a grande violência está agora em Idleb, onde se concentram as forças do chama-



Kofi Annan com Bachar al-Assad

do Exército Sírio Livre, uma milícia da oposição que agrega numerosos desertores das forças armadas, incluindo oficiais de alta patente, misturados com civis mal armados. A rebelião começou há um ano, tendo na sua origem protestos pacíficos. No início, inspirados pela Primavera Árabe que decorria na Tunísia e no Egito, os manifestantes pediam apenas reformas políticas, mas o regime respondeu com brutalidade. Entretanto, formaram-se milícias, que reuniram sobretudo os desertores do exército. A insurreição subiu de tom,

tendo na sua base a maioria sunníta hostil a um sistema político que privilegia a minoria alauíta (do ramo xita do Islão) e também tem o apoio da pequena comunidade cristã síria.

Kofi Annan, um ex-secretário-geral da ONU, deverá deixar hoje Damasco, para se encontrar com dirigentes da oposição no exterior e tentar visitar os campos de refugiados que entretanto estão a ser organizados na Turquia. As Nações Unidas estão a preparar uma operação humanitária de grande envergadura.

Publico (Portugal)

Bashar al-Assad diz a Kofi Annan que não negocia com terroristas

Enquanto estiveram à conversa num hotel de Damasco, as forças do Governo deram início ao grande assalto a Idlib, a segunda cidade rebelde na lista de "limpeza" do regime. A 4.ª divisão volta à acção

Síria
Ana Gomes Ferreira

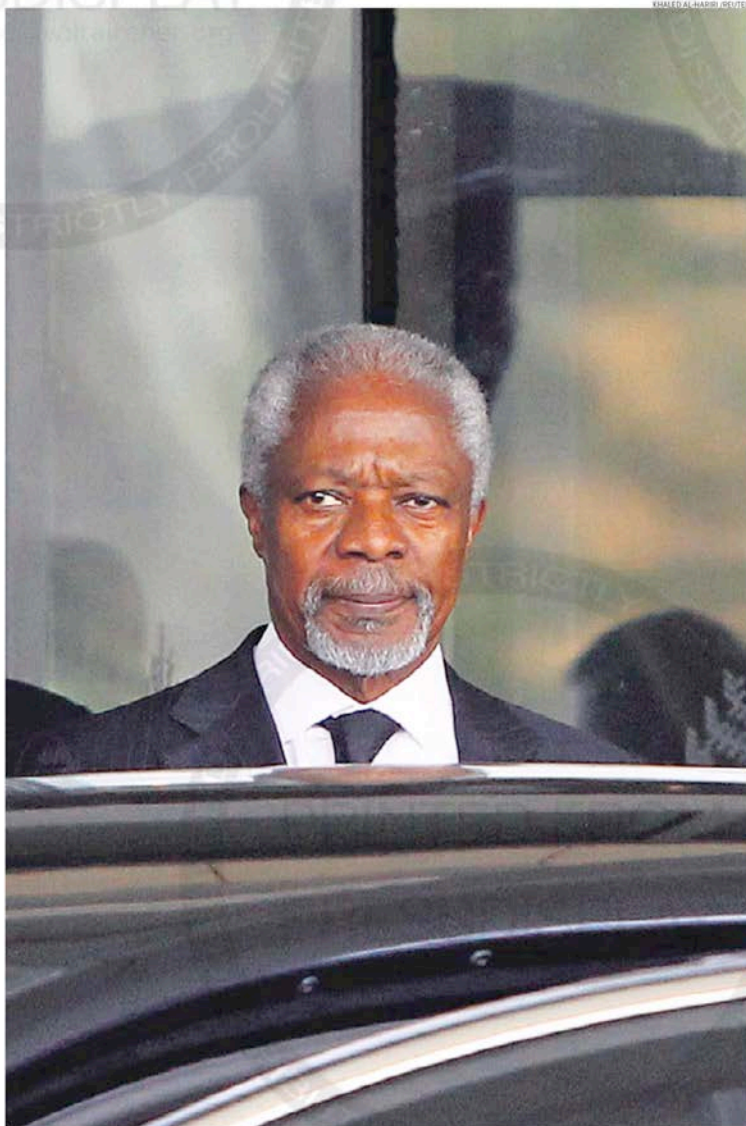
A atmosfera do encontro de duas horas, num hotel em Damasco, foi "positiva", relatou a agência síria Sana. O Presidente Bashar al-Assad recebeu o enviado das Nações Unidas e da Liga Árabe, Kofi Annan, para lhe dizer que não negocia com terroristas.

"A Síria está preparada para fazer qualquer esforço para encontrar uma solução", mas "o diálogo e a acção política não podem ter êxito enquanto houver grupos terroristas activos que espalham o caos e a instabilidade", disse o Presidente ao diplomata, segundo a Sana. Um porta-voz da ONU diria horas depois que Annan apresentou várias propostas a Assad – sobre o fim das mortes, a entrada de ajuda humanitária para os civis, a libertação de presos políticos e o início do diálogo político – e classificou o diálogo como "cândido e abrangente". Os dois homens marcaram novo encontro para esta manhã, antes de Annan seguir para o Qatar.

Assad foi claro: vai continuar a batalha contra a oposição. Enquanto conversava com o enviado, as suas tropas deram início à grande ofensiva para "limpar" a cidade de Idlib (noroeste). "Limpeza" foi a palavra usada há duas semanas por um alto responsável militar ao referir-se ao assalto final a Homs.

A cidade começou a ser bombardeada às 5h (hora local) e o ataque constante com artilharia pesada foi iniciado a meio da manhã. Os relatos das testemunhas ouvidas pela Reuters, via telefone, davam conta do avanço dos tanques, que se posicionavam nos acessos à cidade e em zonas estratégicas.

Ao fim da tarde, o Observatório Sírio dos Direitos Humanos tinha registado a morte de 62 pessoas em toda a Síria, a maior parte em Idlib. É o "maior bombardeamento desde o reforço de efectivos", indicou à AFP Rami Abdel Rahmane, presidente do Observatório, sediado no estrangeiro mas em contacto com o terreno. No início da semana, o regime enviou para Idlib a 4.ª divisão blindada, comandada por Maher Al-Assad, irmão do Presidente, e responsável pela "limpeza" de Homs.



Kofi Annan foi muito criticado pela oposição síria por abrir o diálogo com o Presidente Assad

A BBC apurou que os bombardeamentos são indiscriminados: como em Homs, os alvos são todos, civis e militares.

Assad trava, há um ano, uma guerra contra os sírios que, na sequência das sublevações no Egipto e na Tunísia (onde os regimes caíram), foram para a rua pedir reformas democráticas. As manifestações, reprimidas pela força, não pararam até agora; à luta civil juntou-se um Exército de Libertação da Síria e o balanço da ONU dá conta de mais de 8500 mortos em 12 meses.

Segundo a Sana, a maior parte dos terroristas em Idlib já tinham sido mortos e os outros presos. A oposição no local, no entanto, falava de núcleos de resistência e de vários soldados governamentais mortos.

Kofi Annan foi muito criticado pela oposição síria (a militar e a civil, que estão associadas) por abrir o diálogo com Assad. Na agenda de 24 horas do enviado estava também um encontro com a oposição, que teve lugar ao início da noite. A mensagem que iria receber ficara clara antes da reunião. "Apoiamos qualquer iniciativa que trave a matança, mas não aceitamos dar a Bashar mais tempo para aniquilar a revolução e manter-se no poder", disse ontem Melham al-Droubi, membro da Irmandade Muçulmana e do Conselho Nacional Sírio, um dos principais grupos da oposição.

Annan chega hoje ao Qatar, um país da linha dura na Liga Árabe no que diz respeito à Síria – defende uma intervenção armada ONU-países árabes que derrube Assad. Seguem-se outros países ligados ao processo de paz na Síria, um deles a Rússia. Ontem, pela primeira vez, o ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros russo, Serguei Lavrov, abriu uma pequena fenda no habitual discurso de apoio a Assad. Num encontro no Cairo com os membros da Liga, disse que a Rússia não está a proteger o regime – Moscovo votou uma resolução no Conselho de Segurança por preconizar o afastamento de Assad.

Cada vez mais isolado, o Presidente sírio deu ordem aos embaixadores na Europa para regressarem a Damasco. Razão: antecipar-se, evitando uma vaga de expulsões num momento em que a União Europeia discute o papel das embaixadas sírias no seu território.

Civilians slaughtered as Assad unleashes gunships

Fighting moves to new front as Annan tries to broker deal with Syria

NICK MEO
in ANTAKYA, TURKEY

THE smuggler's radio crackled into life as shadowy figures emerged from a thicket on the Syrian side of the river, faintly illuminated by a full moon whose light barely penetrated the cloud and drizzle.

The men were army deserters escaping Bashar al-Assad's Syria with the help of rebel sympathisers, and smugglers who demanded hard cash in return for arranging the dinghy that ferried them across.

"I had to get out, I had no weapon to fight with and if they caught me they would have cut off my head," said Abdul, a gangly 18-year-old who stepped out of a dinghy to be embraced by a fellow rebel.

Like scores of other refugees — villagers and townspeople, soldiers and civilians, doctors and activists — they brought with them stories of an unfolding horror in northern Syria.

In a frightening escalation of the Syrian regime's war on its people, helicopter gunships now hang in the air above the countryside, shooting at civilians on the move, or turning their fire on rebel villages — in addition to the tanks and artillery already punishing

those who dared to oppose Mr Assad.

Witnesses who crossed into Turkey last week described the killing of 82 people in Idlib province in six major incidents over recent days; the total figure across the whole area is likely to be far higher.

One terrified man had counted up to 40 bodies after helicopters and infantry attacked his village just a few miles from the border.

Others described men and boys being rounded up in villages and taken off by the security forces.

While the world's attention was fixed on Homs, the scene of siege and slaughter earlier this month, 100 miles to the north a new offensive was unleashed, largely unreported.

Yesterday there were growing fears that the offensive was a prelude to an attack on the city of Idlib, the stronghold of the revolution in the north — described by activists as a second Homs in the making.

A column of 42 tanks and 131 troop carriers was reported heading for the city as shelling of rebel-held districts was stepped up, escape routes cut and the siege tightened.

On the ground in Syria's killing fields, there were fresh reports of fighting. In Idlib province 16 rebels died in an



BRUTAL CLASH: An injured Free Syrian Army fighter is attended by doctors after being injured during fighting in Idlib

ambush, and in a separate incident four government soldiers died when their convoy was attacked.

In the mountainous terrain of Idlib province, where soldiers can easily be ambushed on winding roads and rebels can sometimes blow up tanks, helicopter gunships are a brutally effective weapon, almost impervious to ground fire.

Regime opponents in Turkey feel forsaken by the

al-Thani, Qatar's foreign minister, issued one of the strongest criticisms yet of the Syrian regime by a fellow Arab nation, saying the killing of civilians amounted to "genocide".

A mission to end the violence led by Kofi Annan, the new envoy for the United Nations and Arab League, appeared to suffer a setback on its first day in Damascus.

He met Mr Assad, in what state television described

as a "positive atmosphere".

The president said he was ready to consider any honest attempt to find a solution, but ruled out dialogue while "armed groups" were active. He insisted that Syria was under attack from gangs backed by foreign enemies.

Opposition groups, meanwhile, have dismissed Mr Annan's chances of achieving anything much.

© Telegraph

The Independent on Sunday (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)



THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

2 Derry Street, London W8 5HF
Telephone: 020-7005 2000 Fax: 020-7005 2627
The Independent on the internet: www.independent.co.uk

Enough is enough

Would Afghanistan be worse off today if British forces had

withdrawn from combat roles in 2010, as this newspaper proposed on Remembrance Sunday the year before? This is an unanswerable question, but if there are reasons for thinking that the consequences would have been negative, why should they be any less so at the end of 2014, when American and British forces intend to pull out?

The official answer is that another three years will give time for the Afghan security forces to be built up so that they can assume responsibility. That has been the official line for the past 10 years – it has always been claimed that, in another few years, the Afghans will be ready to take control of their own country.

The Independent on Sunday has reported more than once the despairing secret assessments of Afghan capability carried out by the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf). There has been no observable progress for years. There are two possible responses to this. One is to say, give us more

time and we can fix it. That is the definition of madness: to repeat actions and to expect a different result. The alternative response would be to say, “We are leaving in a year, you must be as ready as possible by then.”

It could be argued that only the setting of a withdrawal date will concentrate minds. But once that decision has been made, the date might as well be in a year’s time. Little or nothing will be gained by taking longer over it.

Jim Murphy, Labour’s defence spokesman, took issue with our view in these pages last week, saying that he agreed with the timetable set by the coalition government, in approximate co-ordination with Barack Obama’s administration. “Early withdrawal would be as dangerous as a ‘cliff-edge’ departure, which could threaten the nation’s fragile fortunes,” he wrote. But what we proposed was neither early – Isaf has been in Afghanistan for a decade now – nor sudden.

A more substantial criticism might be that a unilateral British pull-out would undermine our American partners. After all, we have 9,500 troops there, while the US has 90,000. This is not a trivial

consideration, but neither should it be the determinant of British foreign policy.

This newspaper is not opposed to the use of British military force in a just cause. We supported the limited intervention in Libya last year. Again, nothing is certain, but it averted a bloodbath that Gaddafi had threatened in explicit terms and, whatever difficulties that country may now be going through, the Libyans are more the authors of their destiny than the unfortunate Iraqis ever were.

We should, however, be clear about the conditions in which intervention is justified. At the moment, those conditions are not unambiguously satisfied in Syria, horrible though the war might be that Bashar al-Assad is fighting against his own people. No one has yet come up with a plan for no-fly zones or arming the opposition that offers any certainty of protecting more people than it would harm. But we agree with Senator John McCain about this much: that Nato countries should be planning for military contingencies.

Although our mission in Afghanistan did not fit into the emerging doctrine of liberal intervention – it was not to avert

a humanitarian emergency – we supported it in the early phase, to require the Taliban to comply with international law by surrendering the perpetrators of 9/11. For noble but misguided reasons, the mission then crept, quite quickly, towards the construction of a new country. But, as Mr Murphy wrote last week, it should never have been “about nation-building, but about preventing Afghanistan from again becoming an incubator for extremism”. That objective was achieved early on, and the country appeared unlikely to fall again under the sway of the Taliban. Paradoxically, it is the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan that now gives the Taliban more power and coherence.

Perfect conditions for withdrawal are never going to be achieved in Afghanistan, any more than they were in Iraq. And we have long since passed the moment when the benefits of staying longer outweigh the costs.

Since November 2010, when the *IoS* wanted the last British combat troops to be withdrawn, 61 British soldiers have lost their lives, including six in the explosion last week. The sooner we say, “Enough is enough”, the better.

The Sunday Herald (Royaume-Uni / United Kingdom)



Syrian opposition activists have set up a network of clandestine escape routes for those fleeing the brutality and retribution of the Assad regime. Foreign Editor David Pratt is one of only a few journalists to have accompanied them on an undercover night operation.
Photographs: David Rose
Cover photograph: Timo Vogt

THE rickety little rowing boat slipped silently across the water, silhouetted in the moonlight. Freedom and safety for those on board was now almost within reach. Behind them lay the hell of weeks on the run, dodging army patrols, snipers, landmines and the dreaded "ghost gangs" – "shabiha" in Arabic – who kidnap, torture and kill at the Syrian regime's behest.
In a setting reminiscent of some Second World War French resistance mission, we had waited for two hours at an abandoned farmhouse hidden from view of the Turkish army watchtowers and Syrian patrols on either side of the frontier that straddles the Orontes river.
Never was the name of a river more apt. Deriving from the Arabic for "rebel" because it flows south to north, unlike other rivers in the region, the Orontes has become the conduit across which Syrian rebels ferry a human stream of army defectors, traumatised civilians and the wounded.

from hell



Main image, top and centre, the risky operation to bring 17 refugees across the border from Syria to Turkey ends in success and relief. Above, a boy mourns his father, who was shot by a Syrian Army sniper in Idlib

"Make your way one by one across that track to the cover of the trees on the bank," instructed one of the opposition activists, Mustafa, pointing into the darkness as we huddled against the rain and bitter cold in the shelter of the farmhouse yard.

Once on the river bank, Syrian soil lay only yards away – and specks of light on the road beyond were clearly visible through the curtain of falling rain. Soldiers on the move, perhaps? As we anxiously watched and waited, the tension grew.

In the darkness, our small group of Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel activists and smugglers spoke only in whispers, all conscious of how close the opposite bank was and all too aware of recent ambushes by Syrian army snipers deployed along the border in an effort to close down these escape routes.

From out of the inky blackness the pre-arranged on-off blink of some car headlights signalled that the resistance smugglers on the opposite side had arrived with their "cargo".

"Seventeen are coming across tonight, all are army defectors," said Mustafa, as a tiny metal canoe capable of carrying only two or three at a time cast off into the river towards us.

As the men stepped on to Turkish soil, greeted by handshakes and hugs, there was a palpable sense of relief. Most had come with nothing more than the clothes they stood up in or carrying a few belongings in plastic carrier bags. After what seemed an interminable wait, all 17 were safely across and huddled in the comparative safety of the farmhouse smoking cigarettes, their lighters momentarily revealing unshaven faces etched with anxiety and exhaustion.

As so often happens after the tension of such an experience begins to melt away, the men began to offload what they had witnessed in a flood of vivid, grotesque snapshots, exposing yet more secrets of the bloodshed taking place deep inside Syria.

"I saw houses shelled, a pregnant woman shot dead by security men, dogs feeding on bodies," recalled one.

A younger man described how he had been on the run for weeks, sleeping in the snowy mountains and in safe houses provided by resistance sympathisers before getting here to Turkey.

"The scariest moment was when I was moving on foot at night and a helicopter passed overhead clearly searching for us," he told me.

The defectors had come from all over Syria, but the majority in this latest exodus were from the country's northern Idlib province. This past week, Syrian troops and tanks have been massing for an assault on the rebellious Idlib City, an onslaught activists warn will result in a siege, atrocities and a civilian death toll to match that seen in the recent attack on the Baba Amro district of Homs.

As the regime's grip on the north of the country intensifies, opposition activists know they will have their work cut out to cope with the rapid increase in the clandestine river traffic that will be sure to follow.

Those on the run from the regime

who head to Turkey have been forced to journey further and further north in an effort to avoid the Syrian forces that have occupied many villages.

Every day they come, filling refugee camps in frontier towns such as Yayladagi, Hacı Pasa and Antakya. Last month alone, according to Turkish officials, 1500 Syrians crossed the border, pushing the numbers of refugees in the region's camps past 11,000, just short of a high reached last June after heavy clashes between defectors and the Syrian Army. And these are only the official numbers – thousands of others are believed to have entered the region without registering with the Turkish authorities.

All those who come across the border have one thing in common: the fearful tales of what they left behind and the dangers faced on the way out.

"A few nights ago, we brought some women and kids across, but just before they arrived at the crossing point one



'If you walk along the street in Kebeni you will see dead right now, maybe 40 or 50'

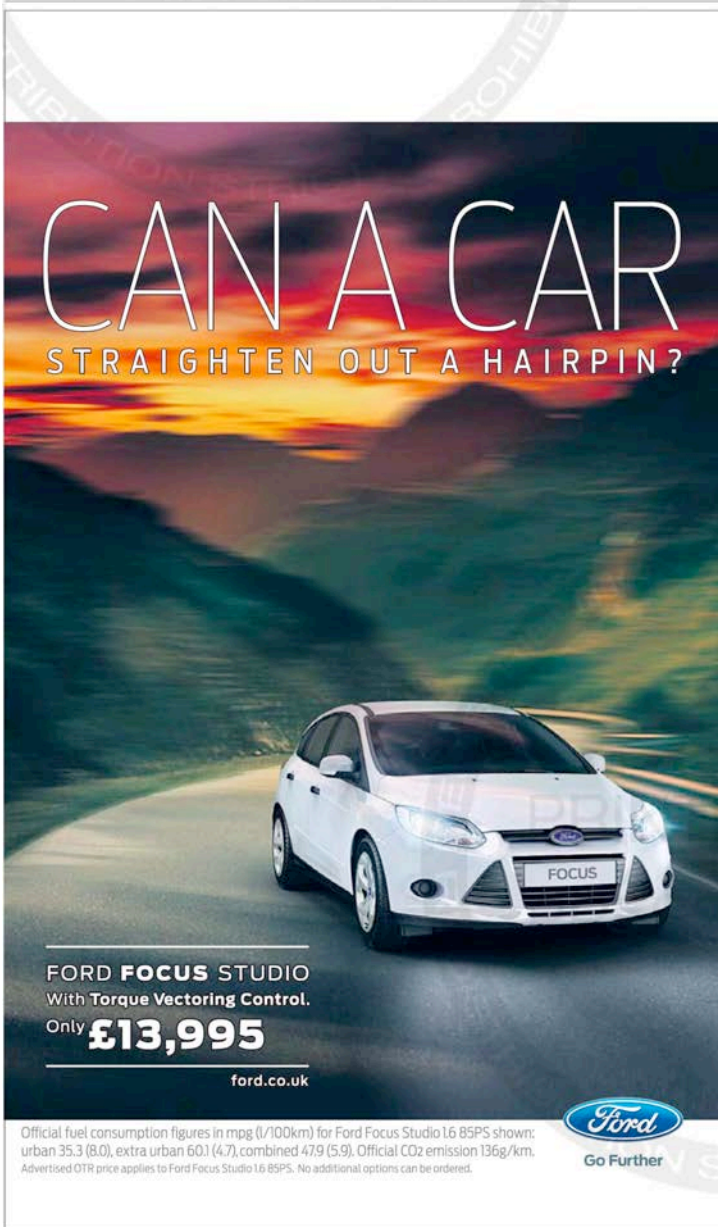
▶▶ of the women stepped on a mine that blew her left leg off," said Mustafa. "You can't begin to imagine the fear, the state of the children and the problems we had getting her over the river."
The courage of the activists involved in this lifeline network of

escape routes is incredible. Some are making the hazardous border crossing almost daily in an effort to bring in badly needed medical supplies, treat those wounded inside Syria or make an assessment of the injured to determine whether they would survive a smuggled evacuation.
Many of those involved in helping the injured are Syrian expatriate

doctors who have come from around the world to offer their services.
One of them, Talal, is a Paris-based cardiologist who along with others is trying to establish a medical infrastructure in advance of what he believes will be an enormous rise in casualties as northern cities such as Idlib and Aleppo become the focus of the revolution and President Bashar al-Assad's efforts to crush it.
"It was very emotional for me to come here to Turkey stand on the border and set eyes on the country I have not visited for 31 years," he tells me.
As if Talal and his colleagues did not have enough hazards to contend with, their efforts to set up a medical network inside Turkey are made all the more difficult by the Turkish authorities' refusal to recognise Syrian medical qualifications – even though most of these people are working as doctors in hospitals in major European cities.
Talal and his colleagues have also been busy highlighting the role played by some pro-regime doctors inside Syria in the torture of wounded prisoners.
"Some doctors are making videos of torture and posting them on websites," says Talal. "You see them laughing in some of the videos. It's hard to imagine this happening but it is, and they do it to intimidate on the regime's behalf."
Talal says it is almost exclusively doctors belonging to the ruling Alawite sect, of which Assad himself is part, who are doing the torturing – but he emphasises "not all Alawites are like this", an observation born out by the ever-increasing number of those from the Muslim sect who have decided that enough is enough and turned their backs on Assad to join the revolutionary cause.
A picture of the extent of torture, atrocities and human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime's security apparatus is slowly but solidly being built up from accounts both by those who have escaped, and, in some cases, from a few foreign journalists who have compiled photographs and eyewitness accounts.

men. Today's Sunday Herald front-page picture is of a man executed by having his throat cut and was taken by Vogt around the same time in a nearby village. Similar accounts can be heard from almost every refugee who makes it to Turkey.
A few days ago, outside the Syrian refugee camp hastily constructed in the Turkish border town of Yayladagi, I spoke with a 21-year-old man who only that afternoon had arrived after walking 15 miles across the mountains. "Muhammed" told of how he was wanted by the Syrian security services, who were searching for him when he fled, and how his father and brother were already in prison for political activities against the regime.
He said on his journey he witnessed the "slaughter" of civilians in a village called Kebeni, near the highway between the cities of Latakia and Aleppo.
"At around 6 o'clock in the morning, helicopters came and fired machine-guns into the village, then the soldiers went in," said Muhammed, who watched the attack from the hills nearby but later went into the village when the Syrian forces left.
"I saw dead; if you walk along the street you will see dead right now, maybe 40 or 50. This was only this morning," he told me.
"I recognised many of the people they had killed, I knew them."
Even as we spoke, a man nearby, another refugee, became hysterical after receiving a call on his mobile phone telling him that the Shabiha paramilitary gangs – recruited from Assad's Alawite sect – had arrived at his own village, Ain Laroze, and rounded up 50 people, including two women, who they had taken away to an uncertain fate.
A recent video made by the Shabiha and designed to instill terror recently made its way on to websites in Syria. In it, a man moves the jaw of a bloodied corpse with his shoe and is heard to say: "Say Bashar al-Assad and the Alawites will forever rule."
Armed and paid a daily rate of 2000 Syrian pounds (about £22), with extra for working on Friday, the weekend day when the largest opposition demonstrations have traditionally taken place, these paramilitary thugs are increasingly deployed across the country to do Assad's bidding, with what one opposition activist described as "a licence to kill".
Yesterday, as Syrian troops pushed ahead with their assault in the north, there were more reports of atrocities, casualties and an exodus of refugees from Idlib City.
"We know many more people want to come out to Turkey, but it's very dangerous now," said Mustafa, the activist smuggler.
But he added: "We will do our best for anyone who needs help, we free Syrians must stand together at this difficult time."

erman photo-journalist Timo Vogt, who recently spent time in Idlib province with the rebels, documented one such atrocity. On February 21, the Syrian army attacked Kureen, which was among the first villages in Syria's north-west to fall under opposition control. While some of Kureen's villagers and rebel activists managed to flee before the early morning attack, the majority of the population were caught in a shelling barrage that lasted seven hours.
When regime troops finally stormed the village, they searched and burnt down houses, looted shops and cars and executed six




**CAN A CAR
STRAIGHTEN OUT A HAIRPIN?**

FORD FOCUS STUDIO
With Torque Vectoring Control.
Only **£13,995**

ford.co.uk

Official fuel consumption figures in mpg (l/100km) for Ford Focus Studio 1.6 85PS shown: urban 35.3 (8.0), extra urban 60.1 (4.7), combined 47.9 (5.9). Official CO2 emission 136g/km. Advertised OTR price applies to Ford Focus Studio 1.6 85PS. No additional options can be ordered.



Go Further

The Washington Post on Sunday (USA)

U.S. weighs military moves in Syria

SYRIA FROM AI

U.S. officials say their strategy remains focused on humanitarian aid and organizing the Syrian opposition. But hopes are fading that the opposition will provide a united front sufficient to merit international recognition, as happened in Libya, or that Assad can be persuaded to yield.

As Syrian forces launched a new assault Saturday on the northern region of Idlib, Assad repeated his insistence that the year-long uprising was the work of outside extremists. No political dialogue could succeed "as long as there are armed terrorist groups operating and spreading chaos and instability," Assad told visiting U.N. and Arab League envoy Kofi Annan on Saturday, according to Syria's state news agency.

A U.N. statement said that the talks were "candid and comprehensive" and that Annan would meet with Assad again on Sunday.

At an Arab League meeting in Cairo, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted that "we're not protecting any regime." He said Russia was safeguarding "international law" rather than "looking for a special prize or geographic interest," an apparent dig at those pushing for intervention in a country that has been Russia's firmest ally in the Middle East.

Qatari Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jasim al-Thani told the Cairo gathering that "the world's patience and our patience has run out." The Saudi Arabian foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal, dismissed the prospect of more "hollow resolutions and . . . spineless positions," al-Jazeera reported from Cairo.

Risks to region are growing

There is widespread agreement that the threat to regional and international stability increases with each day that passes, as more civilians are killed in ever-more brutal ways, with no progress toward a peaceful transition.

"The longer this goes on, the deeper the sectarian divisions, the higher the risks of long-term sectarian conflict, the higher the risk of extremist involvement," Jeffrey D. Feltman, the State Department's senior diplomat for the region, told Congress last week.

At the same Senate hearing, Gen. James N. Mattis, head of the U.S. Central Command, known as Centcom, said that the replacement of Assad with a democratic government would be "the biggest strategic setback" in 25 years for Iran, Assad's other principal ally.

Although both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have said they are willing to arm the rebels, other nations

are concerned about the cohesiveness and intentions of the Syrian opposition.

In broad terms, other options include establishment of an internationally protected "safe zone" along Turkey's 500-mile border with Syria, where humanitarian and military aid would be assembled and opposition military forces organized, or a Libya-like air assault to destroy Syria's formidable air defenses.

The United States is prepared to provide communications equipment and intelligence to an effort aimed at arming the opposition, according to U.S. and other officials from the region, who agreed to discuss the situation only on the condition of anonymity.

Only the United States is seen as capable of organizing and sustaining the most extreme alternative: establishment of a no-fly zone or direct air protection. U.S. defense officials have said it would take weeks to prepare for any such move, and additional weeks to execute it. Large numbers of aircraft and personnel would need to be moved from other areas of operation.

In hearings last week, some lawmakers, led by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), insisted the administration had a moral duty to use whatever means necessary to stop the Syrian slaughter.

Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said preliminary estimates of what a U.S. military role would require had already been made under President Obama's direction, although no decision had been reached to begin developing detailed military options.

But "we would have to have some legal basis," Dempsey said, either "the consent of a nation, in our national self-defense, or with an UNSCR," a U.N. Security Council resolution.

Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta's reference to obtaining "international permission," made in a Senate hearing Thursday, raised some ire among Republicans. Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) said he was "breathless" at the idea that the United States would ask outsiders — rather than Congress — for permission to deploy its military forces.

But even if the administration determined that the situation was a direct threat to U.S. national security, officials say, it believes international participation is both prudent and necessary.

Turkey, whose role would be key in any intervention, from safe zones to no-fly zones, has been the most skittish about the legal grounds. Even a "humanitarian corridor" to deliver aid to be-

sieged Syrians would require some kind of outside military involvement, a senior administration official said.

"After Srebrenica, nobody is going to want a humanitarian corridor unless there are the means and authority to protect it," the official said, referring to the 1995 massacre of Bosnian Muslims in a supposedly "safe area" under U.N. protection.

A Security Council resolution is the gold standard for any intervention. But international lawyers have been reviewing other options. When Russia vetoed Security Council resolutions during the Korean War, the U.N. General Assembly determined it could circumvent a deadlocked council by a two-thirds vote.

NATO intervened without U.N. authorization in bombing Serbia during the 1999 Kosovo war, a conflict that pro-intervention lawmakers have cited as a template. Panetta said last week that he thought NATO should take up the Syria issue, but on Saturday, a senior NATO official said that is unlikely to happen.

Following a meeting Thursday with Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, Turkish President Abdullah Gul said his government was opposed to any intervention "from outside the region." Marzouki said Tunisia would be willing to send forces to Syria as part of an Arab peacekeeping force.

If all else fails, Turkey has indicated it might be willing to accept an agreement by the newly formed international Friends of Syria group, which first met in Tunis two weeks ago. The group, which includes Arabs, Europeans and the United States, is due to hold its next gathering in Istanbul in late March or early April.

Unity might not be enough

But even international unity, another senior diplomat from the region said, may not be enough in the absence of opposition unity inside Syria.

Days after the Syrian National Council was recognized in Tunis as "a legitimate representative of the opposition, the group fractured. Haitham al-Maleh, a former judge who was held for years in Assad's prisons, and 20 other council members declared the opposition council too weak and too dominated by exiles, and broke off to form their own organization.

When SNC President Burhan Ghalioun later announced the formation of a defense ministry to set strategy for the Free Syrian Army, opposition armed forces said they would decide their own strategy and leadership.

deyoungk@washpost.com

Chicago Tribune (USA)

Syrians in Lebanon recall horrors

Refugees from Homs tell of government shelling, killings, rapes

BY RIMA MARROUCH
Special to Tribune Newspapers

ARSAL, Lebanon — During a pause in the shelling, Um Mahmood and her 9-year-old son ducked out of their house together in Baba Amr, the most contested neighborhood in the Syrian city of Homs.

Their entire family of nine had been waiting for a chance to flee the government onslaught, and the rebels had sent word that they should use the lull to get out.

But as they hurried along a dirt road, several shells landed nearby, knocking them to the ground. Other family members scattered. The boy ran away, but Um Mahmood couldn't. For 15 minutes as the shells fell, she lay frozen to the spot, afraid that moving would make her a target. Finally, a rebel dragged her to safety.

More than 2,000 Syrians have fled into Lebanon in the past week alone, according to the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. The exodus came as a month of government shelling, which activists said killed hundreds of people, culminated in a rebel withdrawal from Baba Amr.

The pullback appears to have emboldened President Bashar Assad's forces, which launched an assault Saturday on the Idlib area to the north.

Some of the Syrians have since returned home, but Um Mah-



OMAR IBRAHIM/REUTERS PHOTO
Syrian refugees receive humanitarian aid from an Islamic organization in Tripoli, Lebanon. More than 2,000 people have fled attacks by Syrian forces in the last week, according to the United Nations.

mood and her relatives are among about 80 families that found refuge in this Lebanese village.

They tell of tense army searches, killings in the street and dramatic escapes. There also are multiple accounts of summary executions and rape by government forces, most of them second-hand and unconfirmed.

Both sides in the conflict, which is largely being fought out of sight of foreign journalists, are believed to have committed abuses. Claims and counterclaims cannot be independently verified. The government says more than 2,000 members of its security forces have

been killed.

As she told her story, Um Mahmood, 40, rubbed her eyes with exhaustion: The family left so quickly that her 7-year-old daughter didn't even have time to put on her shoes.

She and other women interviewed here asked to be identified by traditional nicknames derived from their eldest sons' names.

Before the long bombardment of Homs began, families said, the army regularly entered neighborhoods to raid homes.

Um Ayman, from Qusair, a town in Homs province, said that when about 20 soldiers stormed her



TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

house two months ago, they threw away all of the family's food and smashed their electronics.

"They put the gun to my head and asked me, 'Where does your father hide the Kalashnikov?'" said Yamen, Um Ayman's 9-year-old nephew. "I told them I don't know and I ran away."

Parents said they were particularly worried about rape.

"Do you think people left just for fear of death?" asked Um Mahmood. "Death is better. The father whose daughters are taken away, he can't say a word."

Despite 20 days of shelling, Um Anaar, 39, and her extended family had hoped to stick it out in Qusair, a town the army suspected of harboring defectors.

But two weeks ago, the family home was shelled. Although no one was injured, the extended family of 22 fled en masse.

"These are all we brought with us," she said, referring to her children. "We dressed them in two layers of clothes because we couldn't bring anything."

Talks aimed at averting civil war

BEIRUT — A high-level peace envoy met Saturday with Syrian President Bashar Assad, but a reported offensive against rebels in the country's rugged northwest highlighted the ferocity of the violence almost a year after the country's uprising began.

Former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan met with Assad in the capital, Damascus, in a bid to head off what U.S. and other officials fear could become a full-fledged civil war in Syria, where protesters and insurgents demanding Assad's ouster have battled security forces. Syrian television called Annan's visit "positive," but there was no word Saturday on any concrete results.

Meanwhile, at least 29 people were killed and hundreds wounded Saturday in Idlib city and the nearby village of Binrish, Zidan said.

— Patrick McDonnell,
Tribune Newspapers

Now they are living in a rented home furnished with donated items and wearing borrowed clothes. The family says it had no other choice.

"We left for the sake of the children," Um Anaar said.

A Tribune Newspapers reporter in Arsal contributed.

Dallas Morning News (USA)

Syrian leader isn't ready for negotiations

Opposition, too, says talks would be fruitless amid deadly crackdown

BEIRUT — Syria launched a long-anticipated assault to crush the opposition in the rebellious north on Saturday, bombarding its main city with tank rounds from all sides and clashing with rebel fighters struggling to hold back an invasion.

President Bashar Assad rejected any immediate negotiations with the opposition, striking a further blow to already staggering international efforts for talks to end to the conflict. Assad told U.N. envoy Kofi Annan that a political solution is impossible as long as "terrorist groups" threaten the country.

The opposition's political leadership has also rejected dialogue, saying that talk is impossible after a yearlong crackdown that the U.N. estimates has killed more than 7,500 people.

Syrian forces have been building up for days around Idlib, the capital of a hilly, agricultural province along the Syria-Turkey border that has been a hotbed of protests against Assad's government.

Saturday morning, troops blasted Idlib for hours with dozens of tank rounds as the forces moved to encircle the town. Many families fled, carrying blankets and other meager belongings. Others huddled in homes.

Rebel fighters rushed through Idlib's streets, taking cover behind walls to fire on the attackers with automatic weapons. Trucks sped wounded fighters to clinics, and men on one street destroyed speed bumps with shovels so ambulances could drive faster. Many low-level soldiers in the area have joined the opposition and

IN THE KNOW Intelligence reports

Recent U.S. intelligence reports suggest that President Bashar Assad still has the support of a formidable army that is unlikely to turn on him, a loyal inner circle, and the elite class. The assessment hinted at a continuing campaign lasting several months, if not longer, with many more Syrians dying. Over time, worsening economic conditions could threaten Assad's hold on power, but no mass protests over food or fuel shortages have broken out, and there hasn't been any discernible slowing in military activity because of a lack of supplies, three senior intelligence officials said Friday.

The Associated Press

an Army.

Many fear that the offensive in Idlib could end up like the government's campaign against a rebel-held neighborhood in the central city of Homs. Troops besieged and shelled the neighborhood, Baba Amr, for weeks before capturing it on March 1. Activists say hundreds were killed, and a U.N. official who visited the area this week said she was "horrified" by the destruction in the district, now virtually deserted.

Late Saturday, Idlib activist Fadi al-Yassin said the army had closed off the city's main exits, making it harder for civilians to flee.

Al-Yassin estimated that the city has as many as 1,000 fighters, but most have only light arms and are short on ammunition.

Western powers have said they will not intervene militarily in Syria as they did last year against Moammar Gadhafi in Libya. Top officials in Saudi Arabia and Qatar have spoken positively of the idea of arming the rebels but have not an-

Los Angeles Times (USA)

Annan presses Assad to end Syrian turmoil

PATRICK J. McDONNELL
REPORTING FROM BEIRUT

A high-level peace envoy urged Syrian President Bashar Assad to take "concrete steps" to end the turmoil in his nation, the United Nations said Saturday, but a reported offensive against rebels in the country's rugged northwest highlighted the ferocity of the violence almost a year after the country's uprising began.

Former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan met with Assad in Damascus, the Syrian capital, in a bid to head off what U.S. and other officials fear could become a full-fledged civil war in Syria, where protesters and insurgents demanding Assad's ouster have been battling security forces.

The veteran Ghanaian diplomat, representing both the U.N. and the Arab League, faced a daunting task: reaching a deal to curb the violence and jump-start negotiations between two sides that refuse to speak with each other.

Annan expressed "grave concern" during "candid" and "comprehensive" talks with the Syrian president, the U.N. said in a statement. The special envoy "put forward several proposals to stop the violence and the killing, give access for humanitarian agencies ... release detainees, and start an inclusive political dialogue to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the people," the U.N. said.

While in Damascus, the U.N. said, Annan also met with opposition leaders and "young activists," as well as with prominent members of the business community.

Annan is expected to meet again with Assad on Sunday before leaving Syria for Doha, Qatar.

Even as Annan and



Syrian Arab News Agency

SPECIAL ENVOY to Syria Kofi Annan, left, and Syrian President Bashar Assad meet in Damascus.

Assad spoke, opposition activists reported that government tanks and artillery were attacking rebel strongholds in the northwest province of Idlib, near the Turkish border.

In Idlib city, the major urban center, the opposition reported that tanks posted on the outskirts were firing into populated areas, especially the Shamali neighborhood, a protest hub. The report could not be verified; both sides in the Syrian uprising have provided misleading versions of events.

"They are trying to do what they did in Baba Amr," said an Idlib opposition leader who identified himself by his nom de guerre, Ahmad Zidan, contacted via the Skype communications system. He was referring to the bombardment last month of a former rebel enclave in the central city of Homs, which was overrun by government forces March 1 after weeks of shelling, according to the opposition.

At least 29 people were killed and hundreds wounded Saturday in Idlib city and the nearby village of Bin-nish, Zidan said.

Residents of Idlib city had been expecting the onslaught for days and were taking shelter in basements and mosques, said a Syrian doctor who was in touch with family members there.

Annan's peace plan proposals were said to include a cease-fire, humanitarian aid delivery, a return of troops to their barracks and the start of a dialogue between Assad and the opposition. The chances of accomplishing any of those goals remained unclear.

The government press agency issued a statement

from Assad saying dialogue could not succeed "as long as there are armed terrorist groups that are working to spread chaos and destabilize the country."

That would seem to rule out talks with the rebels, whom the Syrian government has described as foreign-backed terrorists. Likewise, opposition groups have said they would not speak with Assad, whom they brand a war criminal.

Annan's mission has the backing of Syria's major international ally, Russia, which last month joined with China in vetoing a U.N. Security Council resolution that would have called on Assad to relinquish power.

Russia's defense of Assad has led to strained relations with many nations, including the United States and various Arab countries, where Moscow has been publicly excoriated.

In a bid to improve its regional standing, Russia on Saturday presented a "five-point" Syrian peace plan to the Arab League in Cairo.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have called for international arming of Syria's rebels, took issue with Russia's perceived defense of Assad. Qatar's prime minister, Sheik Hamad bin Jassim al Thani, accused Assad of "systematic genocide" and called for Arab and international troops to be dispatched to Syria.

"We must send a message to the Syrian regime that the world's patience and our patience has run out," he said.

patrick.mcdonnell
@latimes.com
A Times staff writer in Beirut contributed to this report.

Assad: No dialogue as long as 'terrorists' spreading chaos

Syrian leader rebuffs UN-Arab League envoy as his forces kill dozens in Idlib, Homs

• BY OREN KESSLER and BOHUS

Syria's President Bashar Assad rebuffed the UN-Arab League envoy to his country Saturday, telling Kofi Annan no political solution was possible to the crisis while "terrorist" groups were spreading chaos.

"Syria is ready to make a success of any honest effort to find a solution for the events it is witnessing," state news agency SANA quoted Assad as telling Annan, a former UN secretary-general.

"No political dialogue or political activity can succeed while there are armed terrorist groups operating and spreading chaos and instability," Assad said.

A UN spokesman said Annan had made proposals on stopping the violence and the killing, access for humanitarian agencies, release of detainees and the start of political dialogue.

The talks were "candid and comprehensive," said Annan, who will meet Assad again on Sunday.

While Annan and Assad discussed the crisis, Syrian troops were assaulting the northwest-ern city of Idlib, a rebel base-ment.

"Regime forces have just stormed into Idlib with tanks

and heavy shelling, is now taking place," an activist said.

Sixteen rebel fighters, seven soldiers and four civilians were killed in the Idlib fighting, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which said 15 other people, including three soldiers, had been killed in violence elsewhere.

In Washington, an Obama administration official said it is exploring options to halt the bloodshed in Syria but is deeply skeptical of military intervention out of fear it could worsen the humanitarian crisis.

In a briefing with a small group of reporters on Friday, the official contrasted the situation in Syria with Libya, where a NATO campaign bolstered rebels who eventually toppled Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi last year.

There was a "very viable" military option in Libya that involved stopping the advance of Gaddafi's forces and creating civilian protection zones, but those conditions do not exist in Syria, the official said.

"In Syria, it's a much more difficult environment because you basically have regime security forces that are in many respects intermingled with the population," he said.

"A lot of the catastrophic

violence is taking place through artillery, through shelling, through snipers. And for those reasons, there's not simple military options that present themselves," he said.

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said shortcomings in the UN Security Council, where Russia and China have twice vetoed resolutions on Syria, had allowed the killing to continue.

France says it will oppose any measure that holds the Syrian government and its foes equally responsible for the bloodshed.

Despite their differences, Lavrov and Arab ministers said they had agreed on the need for an end to violence in Syria.

They also called for unbiased monitoring of events there, opposition to foreign intervention, delivery of humanitarian aid and support for Annan's peace efforts.

The exiled opposition Syrian National Council, in a statement on its website, ruled out talks while Assad remains in power.

"Negotiations can never take place between the victim and the perpetrator," Assad and his entourage must step down as a condition before starting any serious negotiations," it said.

The Syrian opposition followed a trip to Damascus on Monday, a day in which activists said Assad's

the Syrian regime that the world's patience and our patience has run out, as has the time for silence about its practices," Shleikh Hamad said.

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said shortcomings in the UN Security Council, where Russia and China have twice vetoed resolutions on Syria, had allowed the killing to continue.

France says it will oppose any measure that holds the Syrian government and its foes equally responsible for the bloodshed.

Despite their differences, Lavrov and Arab ministers said they had agreed on the need for an end to violence in Syria.

They also called for unbiased monitoring of events there, opposition to foreign intervention, delivery of humanitarian aid and support for Annan's peace efforts.

The exiled opposition Syrian National Council, in a statement on its website, ruled out talks while Assad remains in power.

"Negotiations can never take place between the victim and the perpetrator," Assad and his entourage must step down as a condition before starting any serious negotiations," it said.

The Syrian opposition followed a trip to Damascus on Monday, a day in which activists said Assad's



UN-ARAB LEAGUE ENVOY Kofi Annan, right, and Bashar Assad, attend a working lunch at a restaurant in old Damascus yesterday. (Suleib ash-Sherki/Reuters)

forces killed at least 72 people as they bombarded parts of the rebellious city of Homs and sought to deter demonstrators and crush insurgents elsewhere.

Decisive victory has eluded both sides in an increasingly deadly struggle that began as a mainly peaceful protest movement a year ago and now appears to be sliding into civil war.

The United Nations estimates Syrian security forces have killed well over 7,500 people, Syria said in December that "terrorists" had killed more than 2,000 soldiers and

The Syrian opposition denies any al-Qaida role in the uprising, but Islamists are

among rebels who have taken up arms against Assad under the banner of the Free Syrian Army.

Qatar's Sheikh Hamad chided Russia for accepting the Syrian government's portrayal of insurgents as armed gangs.

"There are no armed gangs, the systematic killing came from the Syrian government side for many months. After that, the people were forced to defend themselves so the regime labeled them armed gangs," he told the Arab League meeting.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will meet Lavrov in New York on Monday when the Security Council holds a special meeting on Arab

revolts, with Syria likely to be in focus.

But French foreign minister Alain Juppe said Saturday he was pessimistic over the chances of a Security Council resolution on Syria.

"We were hoping that once the elections in Russia were over dialogue with the Russian authorities could be more consensual," Juppe said at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Copenhagen.

"But for the moment this hope has not been confirmed... Russia continues to block it on different points and there is not an agreement on the text of this resolution," he said. "I don't know if things will evolve here between now and Monday."

Jerusalem Post (Palestine occupée / Occupied Palestine)

Arabs urge Russia to back Syria peace plan

Lavrov: No one side can be blamed for the violence

• BY YASMINE SALEH
and EDMUND BLAIR

Cairo (Reuters) – Gulf Arabs told Russia in blunt language on Saturday its failure to take a tough line on Syria had allowed killing to continue and urged Moscow to back an Arab peace effort that includes a call for Russian ally President Bashar Assad to step aside.

Qatar, which with Saudi Arabia has led efforts to isolate Assad, also told Arab ministers in Cairo and the Russian foreign minister who joined them, it was time to recognize the exiled Syrian National Council as Syria's legitimate representative.

Arabs and Western states have until now held off from such a step, in part because diplomats have said the group has not always shown a united front and it was not clear whether it could command the support of protesters on the streets of Syria.

Sergei Lavrov, addressing the meeting at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo, gave no indication that Moscow's position had shifted. He told Arabs that Russia was not protecting Assad but said no one side could be blamed for the violence.

"We must send a message to the Syrian regime that the world's patience and our patience has run out, as has the time for silence about its practices," Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani said in an opening address.

Arabs, particularly Gulf states that are broadly opposed to Syria's alliance with their regional rival Iran, were frustrated by Russia's veto of a UN Security Council resolution based on an Arab peace plan. China also vetoed it.

The plan called for ending violence and for Assad to hand powers to a deputy so talks with the opposition could start.

Moscow and Beijing have, however, backed a Security Council resolution expressing "deep disappointment" at Syria's failure to allow the UN humanitarian aid chief to visit Syria.

"We must stop issuing hollow resolutions and taking spineless positions," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said in a speech addressing Arab ministers and Lavrov, who stayed on the auditorium podium after addressing ministers.

"The position of those countries which thwarted the UN Security Council resolution and voted against the resolution of the General Assembly gave the Syrian regime a license to extend its brutal practices against the Syrian people," he added.

Russia and the Arab ministers said they agreed on five points in Cairo, namely the need to end violence "from any source," the need for unbiased monitoring, opposition to foreign intervention, delivering humanitarian aid and supporting the UN-Arab League envoy on Syria, Kofi

Annan.

Syrian opposition official Abdel Baset Seda told Reuters the points in the joint statement would not resolve the crisis.

"The only way for the Syrian crisis to end is by a full implementation of the Arab peace plan that includes the call on Bashar Assad to hand over powers," he said from Turkey where he was attending a meeting of the Syrian opposition. After the Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian authorities was vetoed, the UN General Assembly voted to back a similar decision. But such steps are not binding.

Lavrov told ministers Russia "is not protecting any regime. The most urgent task is to end all violence."

He also said Russia was sticking to its principle of not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.

Moscow, a long-standing ally of Damascus and its main arms supplier, has vetoed two UN resolutions, saying they were biased. It says both the government and rebels should be blamed for the violence that has killed thousands of people.

Responding to Lavrov, Qatar's minister said a cease-fire was not enough and that those responsible for violence should be held to account. He also said the media and aid must be allowed into Syria and prisoners detained in the protests should be freed, listing points laid out in the Arab plan.

Sheikh Hamad also indicat-

ed the rebels' actions could not be equated with that of the authorities.

"There are no armed gangs, the systematic killing came from the Syrian government side for many months. After that the people were forced to defend themselves so the regime labeled them armed gangs," the Qatari said.

Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have called for arming the rebels so they can defend themselves against Syrian troops, tanks and heavy weapons. Some other Arabs have been wary such a step will plunge Syria into a full-scale civil war.

In a fresh move to pressure Syria, Sheikh Hamad said: "Here we call for the recognition of the Syrian National Council as the Syrian people's legitimate representative."

He urged Assad's opponents to "rise above their differences and merge into one voice that expresses the aspirations of their people so that they can face the tyranny of the regime."

Although Qatar discussed recognition with Arab ministers charged with following the Syrian crisis, an Arab League source said the issue would continue to be discussed and "there has been no agreement on the issue" among the Arab ministers.

"The time has come to go by the suggestion calling for Arab-international forces to be sent to Syria," Sheikh Hamad said, which an Arab League official said was a reference to the League's earlier call for a UN-Arab peacekeeping force.

Russia and China have so far shielded Damascus from its Western and Arab critics. A new UN Security Council resolution has been drawn up by the United States and is under discussion.

Lavrov told ministers there was a "chance" that agreement on the resolution could be reached if all parties were guided by a wish to end fighting rather than "the desire to support the opposition armed groups to win the battle in the cities."

Arab League chief Nabil Elaraby said discussions were also ongoing with China to press Beijing to change tack on Syria.

The Arab ministers were also expected to discuss Israeli air strikes that killed 10 terrorists in the Gaza Strip on Friday.



SYRIANS PROTEST against President Bashar Assad in Daria, near Damascus, on Friday. (Reuters)

Assad kills all hope for peace

● Tyrant rebuffs Kofi Annan ● Veto emboldened regime: KSA ● 62 butchered



A family escapes from fierce fighting in Idlib. (AP)

Damascus: Arab News
President Bashar Assad, analysts feel, killed all hope for peace in Syria yesterday when he called freedom fighters "terrorists" who are "destabilizing the country." In his meeting with UN/Arab League envoy Kofi Annan,



A tank prepares to attack Hama. (AFP)

the tyrant said "no political solution was possible in Syria" as long as protesters' resistance to the crackdown continues. A UN spokesman said Annan had made proposals on stopping the violence and the killing, access for humanitarian agencies, release of detainees and the start of political dialogue. The talks were "candid and comprehensive," Annan was quoted as saying. At least 62 persons, mostly soldiers and rebels, were killed in violence across Syria yesterday. Among them were 21 army deserters, 19 soldiers and 22 civilians, who were killed in fighting in Idlib.



A Syrian tries to rescue a wounded man in the street in Homs. (AFP)

Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal said shortcomings in the UN Security Council, where Russia and China have vetoed resolutions on Syria, had allowed the killing to go on. Their position, he said, "gave the Syrian regime a licence to extend its brutal practices against the Syrian people."
Qatar Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani said a cease-fire was approved if it was not derailed by a desire to let armed rebels take over Syria's streets. Many opposition leaders say the time for dialogue is long past.
Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who met Annan in Cairo earlier in the day, said the Arab League, a new UN Security Council resolution had a chance of being approved if it was not derailed by a desire to let armed rebels take over Syria's streets. Many opposition leaders say the time for dialogue is long past.

Please read full story on Page 7

Arab News (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

Time to sit down with the Russians



Tariq Alhomayed

THE announcement made by the Russian Foreign Minister and his Qatari counterpart, during a joint-press conference in Cairo yesterday, that Russia and the Arab League have agreed to 5 provisions to settle the Syrian crisis, including the Arab League's (previous) deci-

sions — which includes calling on Bashar Assad to leave power — cannot be viewed as a reversal of the Russian position, so much as an important breakthrough.

The Russian Bear did not come round all the way, but is in the process of doing so. This is something — in addition to what happened yesterday in Cairo — that indicates that Moscow may play the same role in Syria that Riyadh played in Sanaa to secure the exit of Ali Abdullah Saleh under international cover. Yesterday's meeting in Cairo saw Saudi Arabia and Qatar clashing with the Russian foreign minister, as both Prince Saud Al-Faisal and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim confronted their Russian counterpart, defending the Syrian opposition, and reminding him of the history of the region, and the role his country has played in it. For his part, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also used history to defend his country stressing that Moscow never colonized our countries; however Russia's defense of Assad is worse than colonialism! Does this mean we have reached the end of the road? Of course not.

The importance of the Arab League — Russian agreement on these five points can be seen in what was said following the announcement of this; Lavrov announced that this agreement includes "stopping violence from any source, unbiased monitoring of the situation, opposition to foreign intervention, unhindered human-

itarian access to Syria and support of the efforts of the UN — Arab League envoy on Syria, Kofi Annan, based on the framework put forward by the UN and the Arab League." However Sheikh Hamad then said — and this is most important — that he wanted confirmation that "the references that Kofi Annan will adopt are the UN General Assembly resolution issued on Feb. 16, the Arab States' Action Plan adopted on Nov. 2, 2011, and the Arab League resolutions adopted on Jan. 22 and Feb. 12, 2012." All of this means the departure of the tyrant of Damascus from power, however the question is: How will this be achieved? For even if this issue is brought once again before the UN Security Council, after the Russians yesterday accepted what they previously rejected and vetoed, how can this be achieved when the Arab League-Russian agreement stresses that there is to be no foreign intervention in Syria?

It is clear that we are returning today to what I previously wrote a few days ago, namely that Washington believes that Moscow is capable of securing the departure of Assad, according to the Yemen model, particularly as I have received information about a conversation that took place between the Russians and an Arab officials not long ago on Syria, during which the Russians acknowledged that Assad's fall is inevitable, and they are indifferent to this, but they oppose the complete collapse of the regime!

Therefore, wisdom dictates that the time has come to sit down with the Russians, face-to-face, not via statements or group meetings; for Russia has interests that it must take into account, as do the Arabs, most importantly stopping the crimes that are being committed against the Syrian people, and securing the departure of Assad!

Therefore, we must sit down with the Russians, sooner rather than later.

— The author is editor in chief of *Asbarq Al-Awsat*.
Write to him at tariq@asbarqalawsat.com

The Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

UN veto gave Syria license to kill: Saud

‘We must stop issuing hollow resolutions and taking spineless positions’

CAIRO – Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal said in his address Saturday to Arab and Russian foreign ministers meeting on Syria that the veto of a UN Security Council resolution that condemned the Syrian government had allowed violence to continue.

“We must move fast and seriously to give the Syrian people a glimmer of hope to end their ordeal. We must stop issuing hollow resolutions and taking spineless positions,” Prince Saud said in his speech at the Arab ministerial meeting that was attended by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

“The position of those countries which thwarted the UN Security Council resolution and voted against the resolution of the General Assembly gave the Syrian regime a license to extend its brutal practices against the Syrian people,” said Prince Saud.

He also said he hoped Russia would “support the decisions of the Arab League’s council regarding solving the situation in Syria,” a reference to an Arab initiative that includes calling for President Bashar Al-Assad to step aside.

“We see in the presence of Sergei Lavrov a sign which indicates Russia’s attention to the situation in Syria. We welcome him in our meeting but we hope that this attention will be interpreted in a way that reminds us of the supporting stance of Russia to the Arab issues which has always been appreciated by our nations. We believe that this can be done by supporting decisions of the Arab League related to the tackling of Syrian issues,” Prince Saud said.

“We should open all the channels of contacts with representatives of the Syrian opposition and provide all support to it so that it can tackle the situation. Most important of all, we should guarantee the dispatch of urgent humanitarian aid to the affected people besides inviting and urging all international humanitarian agencies and organizations to contribute to this aid,” he said.

Other Arab foreign ministers also told Russia in blunt language



The 5-point formula

Arab and Russian foreign ministers called for an end to the violence in Syria “whatever its source.”

Reading out a joint statement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Al-Thani said they also agreed on setting up a mechanism for “objective monitoring” in the country and had agreed on no foreign intervention there.

They also called for “unhindered humanitarian access” in Syria and support for the mission to Damascus of UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan.

They said the five-point statement was based on the General Assembly resolution passed on February 16 and on previous Arab resolutions.

Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Minister of Foreign Affairs, attends the Arab League foreign ministers meeting on Syria at the League’s headquarters in Cairo, Saturday. – Reuters

its failure to take a tough line on Syria had allowed killing to continue and urged Moscow to back an Arab peace effort.

Qatar told Arab ministers it was time to recognize the exiled Syrian National Council as Syria’s legitimate representative. “We must send a message to the Syrian regime that the world’s patience and our patience has run out, as has the time for silence about its practices,” Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh

Hamad Bin Jassim Al-Thani said in an opening address.

Sheikh Hamad also indicated the rebels’ actions could not be equated with that of the authorities.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters after the meeting at the Arab League headquarters that he and his Arab counterparts want “an end to the violence whatever its source.”

Reading out a joint statement, Lavrov and Qatari Foreign Minister

Sheikh Hamad said they also agreed on setting up a mechanism for “objective monitoring” in the conflict-stricken country, and had agreed on no foreign intervention there.

They also called for “unhindered humanitarian access” in Syria and support for the mission of UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan to Damascus. They said the five-point statement was based on the General Assembly resolution passed on February 16. – Agencies

The Saudi Gazette (Arabie saoudite / Saudi Arabia)

The US and the Syrian crisis



BY ABDULMONEM MOSTAFA

Al-Madina Newspaper

THE American policy on the Middle East has not changed for over 50 years. It focuses on the stability of the flow of oil, Israeli security and political Islam following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US. Anyone attempting to understand American behavior toward the Middle East should focus on these three factors: Oil, Israel and political Islam.

The Iranian issue has these three elements. However, I am not going to talk about Iran here but mainly about the Syrian crisis, the possible solutions and the American position on the crisis. Of course, I have to mention Iran because the Syrian and

Iranian issues are inseparable.

The strategic alliance between Damascus and Tehran concerns the US as this poses a threat to its oil interests. The Syrian crisis and the relationship between the Syrian regime and Hezbollah in Lebanon is a threat to Israel while the relations between Syria, Hezbollah and terror groups like Al-Qaeda affect US policy, particularly when one considers that Syrian Islamists may come to power if the regime of Bashar Al-Assad falls.

Moreover, the security relations between Syria, Moscow and Tehran are a threat to US interests. That makes the Syrian crisis one of the most important issues which President Obama should deal with at the moment. But what can the Obama administration do? What should it avoid? What can Arabs do to influence US decisions?

The United States, as a superpower, can, theoretically, achieve what it wants. But any effort to influence US policy should focus on the motivation of threats. While some Arab nations were trying to motivate the US and Europe to put the Syrian people at the top of their agenda, Benjamin Netanyahu was in the White House persuading the Oval Office to put the Iranian file on top of other files. Netanyahu, who appeared on several US talk shows, said Israel might attack Iran which would drag Washington into the war unless the US itself decides to attack

Iran.

In a nutshell, the Iranian issue has affected Washington's plan for Syria despite the statement by the US Secretary of State that America has supported the UN Security Council resolution denouncing Al-Assad's atrocities in Syria. Russia and China, which vetoed the resolution, are making their own plans to advance their own interests in Syria and in the Middle East.

At the moment, Washington is trying to avoid any direct involvement in a military conflict which might result in the emergence of political Islamists or drag the US into another protracted war as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Syrian crisis and the American concern about Iranian nuclear weapons might enable Arab diplomats to persuade the US to adopt a firm and definite position on the Syrian crisis. Probably, Arabs can convince President Obama that toppling Al-Assad's regime is the best way to pressure Iran to stop its nuclear program.

Launching air attacks on the Syrian regime will reduce its ability to support Tehran and reduce its military capability to fight the rebels. Supporting the Syrian revolt is less costly than waging an all-out war against Iran and more effective in stopping Tehran's nuclear program, which almost all countries believe is clandestinely aimed at making nuclear weapons.

Oman Observer

League tells Russia to back Syria plan

CAIRO — Gulf Arabs told Russia yesterday its failure to take a tough line on Syria had allowed killing to continue and urged Moscow to back an Arab peace effort that includes a call for President Bashar al Assad to step aside.

Qatar also told Arab ministers in Cairo and the Russian foreign minister who joined them, it was time to recognise the exiled Syrian National Council as Syria's legitimate representative.

Sergei Lavrov, addressing the meeting at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo, gave no indication that Moscow's position had shifted. He told Arabs that Russia was not protecting Assad but said no one side could be blamed for the violence.

"We must send a message to the Syrian government that the world's patience and our patience has run out, as has the time for silence about its practices," Qatari Prime Minister Shaikh Hamad bin Jassim al Thani said in an opening address.

"We must stop issuing hollow resolutions and taking spineless positions," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal said in a speech addressing Arab ministers and

Lavrov, who stayed on the auditorium podium after addressing ministers.

"The position of those countries which thwarted the UN Security Council resolution and voted against the resolution of the General Assembly gave the Syrian government a licence to extend its practices against the Syrian people," the Saudi said.

Russia and Arabs said they agreed on five points in Cairo, namely the need to end violence "from any source", the need for unbiased monitoring, opposition to foreign intervention, delivering humanitarian aid and supporting the UN-Arab League envoy on Syria, Kofi Annan.

Lavrov told ministers Russia "is not protecting any government. The most urgent task is to end all violence." He also said Russia was sticking to its principle of not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.

Responding to Lavrov, Qatar's minister said a ceasefire was not enough and said those responsible for violence should be held to account. He also said the media and aid must be allowed into Syria and prisoners detained in the protests should be freed, list-

ing points laid out in the Arab plan.

Shaikh Hamad also indicated the dissidents' actions could not be equated with that of the authorities.

"There are no armed gangs, the systematic killing came from the Syrian government side for many months. After that the people were forced to defend themselves so the regime labelled them armed gangs," the Qatari said.

Both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have called for arming the dissidents so they can defend themselves against Syrian troops, tanks and heavy weapons. Some other Arabs have been wary such a step will plunge Syria into a full-scale civil war.

In what appeared to be a fresh move to pressure Syria, Shaikh Hamad said: "Here we call for the recognition of the Syrian National Council as the Syrian people's legitimate representative."

He urged Assad's opponents to "rise above their differences and merge into one voice that expresses the aspirations of their people so that they can face the tyranny of the regime."

"The time has come to go by the suggestion calling for

Arab international forces to be sent to Syria," Shaikh Hamad said, which an Arab League official said was a reference to the League's earlier call for a UN-Arab peacekeeping force.

Meanwhile, Al Assad told Annan yesterday that no political solution was possible in Syria while "terrorist" groups were destabilising the country.

"Syria is ready to make a success of any honest effort to find a solution for the events it is witnessing," state news agency Sana quoted Assad as telling his guest.

"No political dialogue or political activity can succeed while there are armed terrorist groups operating and spreading chaos and instability," the Syrian leader said after about two hours of talks with the former UN secretary-general.

While they discussed Annan's peace mission, Syrian troops were assaulting the northwestern city of Idlib, a dissident bastion.

"Syrian forces have just stormed into Idlib with tanks and heavy shelling is now taking place," said an activist contacted by telephone.

Annan also planned to meet Syrian dissidents before leaving Damascus today.

— Reuters



Fleeing the fighting

Families flee fierce fighting between the rebel Free Syrian Army fighters and government troops in Idlib, north Syria, yesterday.

Annan fails to persuade Al Assad

Syrian president sees no political solution as Qatar says it is time to send international troops

Dubai (Agencies) Syrian President Bashar Al Assad told UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan yesterday that no political solution was possible in Syria while "terrorist" groups were destabilising the country.

"Syria is ready to make a success of any honest effort to find a solution for the events it is witnessing," state news agency Sana quoted Al Assad as telling his guest.

"No political dialogue or political activity can succeed while there are terrorist groups operating and

spreading chaos and instability," Al Assad told Annan.

Qatari Foreign Minister Shaikh Hamad Bin Jasem Bin Jabr Al Thani Arab foreign ministers in Cairo that it was time to send Arab and foreign troops.

"The time has come to apply the proposal to send Arab and international troops to Syria," Shaikh Hamad said. Qatar also told Arab ministers it was time to recognise the Syrian National Council as the legitimate representative.

Later Gulf ministers told

Russia that its failure to take a tough line had allowed killings to continue and urged Moscow to back an Arab peace effort that includes a call for Al Assad to step aside.

62 more killed

Sergei Lavrov said Russia was not protecting Al Assad but said no one side could be blamed for the violence.

"We must stop issuing hollow resolutions and taking spineless positions," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal said

in a speech addressing Arab ministers and Lavrov.

"The position of the countries which thwarted the UN Security Council resolution and voted against the resolution of the General Assembly gave the Syrian regime a licence to extend its brutal practices against the people," he added.

At least 62 persons, mostly soldiers and rebels, were killed in violence across the country yesterday, with Idlib province bearing the brunt of armed forces' assault.

See also Page 13

The Khaleej Times (EAU / UAE)

Syrian responsibility

The world must explore modest R2P steps to halt killings in Syria

WORLD VIEW

Bennett Ramberg

The world appears unable to do more than wring its hands as the brutalities continue in Syria. Published accounts estimate more than 9,000 people have fallen in the Syrian unrest. One question that emerges is whether the global community is complicit by failing to stop the mayhem.

The Russian and Chinese opposition to UN Security Council action suggests as much, but opponents of the Syria regime still have options based on a broad interpretation of R2P. Rwanda and Bosnia instigated a new era and raised questions whether international intervention should transcend the customary law codified by the United Nations' Article 2 that "Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorise the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state..."

In 2005, the global community agreed that the time for change had arrived. The World Summit – the largest gathering of leaders in history at a plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly – endorsed the Canadian-sponsored Responsibility to Protect initiative that called upon the international community to use diplomatic, humanitarian and, through the Security Council, collective action – namely, force – to protect populations from "genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity."

Libya marked the first test, and the international community stepped up. The Arab League led, calling for a no-fly zone to protect the country's rebelling population. Given the nod by the Security Council, the International Criminal Court indicted Gaddafi for crimes against humanity. The council then endorsed military action calling attention to the regime's "gross and systematic violation of human rights," and "widespread and systemic attacks" that amounted to "crimes against humanity." The seven-month war that followed translated words to action. Many wondered if the principle could survive the test of time.

The world did not have to wait long. While attention focused on Libya, unrest in Syria boiled over into demonstrations that threatened to topple the Assad regime. The government responded with increasing force. As in Libya, the Arab League took the lead to push back. It suspended Syria from the body, prohibited travel of designated Syrian officials to Arab states, froze Syria's government assets abroad, and halted transactions with Syria's central bank and commercial exchanges with the government while calling for President Bashar Al Assad to step



A TOUGH TASK...UN and Arab League special envoy to Syria Kofi Annan (C) arrives for a meeting with Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Al Arabi on March 8 in Cairo. – AFP

down. The US, the European Community and others joined exercising diplomatic and economic sanctions. Collectively these measures suggested that R2P indeed was alive. But as implemented they proved insufficient to halt the violence. Both China and Russia vetoed a watered-down version of the Libya resolution. The Kremlin claimed, repetition of even UN sanctions, let alone military action, would ill serve peace and be a slippery slope to an illegitimate overthrow of a government.

Of course, there is more to the story. In Moscow's case it is not simply its longstanding supportive relationship with the Assad regime that allows it to port its Mediterranean fleet in Tartus. Of greater concern, and this includes China as well, the Kremlin undoubtedly fears that application of R2P to Syria could blow back someday.

Does this pull the rug from Responsibility to Protect in Syria? Not really. The "other means" do not require repetition of the Libya intervention. Neither the West nor the Arab League has the stomach to mire themselves in the potential quagmire that Syria's sectarian and ethnic divisions pose. Rather Syria requires that the League and allies apply a more nuanced approach in addition to enforcement and strengthening of economic and diplomatic sanctions.

On February 16, the General Assembly gave momentum in its 137 to 12 vote – supporting the Egyptian resolution that called upon the Assad regime to halt its crackdown and comply with the Arab League's demand for a transition of power. But the resolution was no action plan and neither did one come from the 60-plus nation "Friends of Syria" February meeting in Tunisia. Nonetheless

there remain modest R2P steps much of the international community can endorse under the umbrella Arab League to stop the slaughter:

The League should restate its January 22 call for Assad to step down to include other key members of the ruling clique. After all, any regime is more than its leader.

Syria's foreign opponents should use the airwaves in a propaganda war to offer amnesty to Syrian forces who lay down arms or defect to the rebel side by a date certain to avoid prosecution for crimes against humanity. Syria's armed resisters should receive military aid and training sufficient to combat the government's infantry, armor and helicopters. The United States and others must lobby Russia and China to support R2P impressing that they are on the wrong side of history with consequences that will diminish their political and economic interests in the region for years to come.

Foreign mediators should help mold the divided Syrian opposition into a united internationally recognised interim government in waiting prepared to lay the foundation for legislative elections and constitution building for a new democratic Syria once the current government falls.

What's at stake in Syria is more than Damascus' future. Successful application of R2P will make a statement that Libya was not a fluke. The international community will assure that the survivor will be not the regime but the people.

Bennett Ramberg served in the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs in the US Department of State during the George H.W. Bush administration. © Yale Center for the Study of Globalisation

The National (EAU / UAE)

Lack of leadership on both sides feeds chaos in Syria



Washington watch
James Zogby

Syria continues its long, slow descent into hell, with violence and tragedy showing no signs of letting up. By now, one year into this horror, it has become clear that neither side can win an easy victory, affirming the adage that there can be “no victor and no vanquished”.

In countries such as Syria, plagued by deep divisions, several scenarios may play out. Scenario No 1: there can be repressive rule by one group over the others (Syria, like its neighbour Iraq, has tried that – and some believe Iraq may be heading there again). Scenario No 2: there can be prolonged civil war (Lebanon lived through that). Scenario No 3: there can be an uneasy truce leading to a somewhat stable modus vivendi among the groups (that’s where Lebanon is now). Scenario No 4: there can be a full-fledged democracy, with full national integration and citizenship rights guaranteed for all.

At the present time, Syria is stuck somewhere between scenarios No 1 and No 2.

For its part, the regime has behaved in an abominable manner. When faced initially with a largely non-violent protest movement, it used brutal repression. This only spurred the opposition, which in response resorted to weapons, taking on the characteristics of a vio-

lent insurgency. This played into the regime’s hands by justifying, at least in their minds, the use of even more brutal force.

Recognising that some change was required, the regime has proposed a series of faux reform initiatives. Because they were introduced by diktat and transparently designed to protect the regime’s authority, these efforts have been rejected by the opposition as either too little too late, or just plain fraudulent.

The regime is more like a military junta than a government. And, for its part, the ruling Baath party is an ossified shell governed by a corrupt clique, and administered by apparatchiks who are often ideologues or fearful functionaries rather than public servants.

The opposition, such as it is, is dispersed and dysfunctional. There is a coalition of committed exiles who have coalesced in the Syrian National Council. Inside Syria, there are opposition figures and groups that have been operating for decades facing down repression, but still convening on occasion to voice their views. They have been joined by a loose committee of activists, the National Coordination Body, operating in many cities. It is this group that has been responsible for organising the street protests and sending information out of the country.

More recently, the opposition

has been joined by groups of officers and soldiers who have turned against the regime, and bands of armed insurgents, some home-grown and others coming into the country from outside. It is these groups that have fuelled what has become the armed insurgency.

What has become painfully clear is that while the regime has lost whatever little legitimacy it may have had with a wide swatch of the population, it still retains support from some significant groups. And the opposition is not yet ready, representative of, or accepted by, all elements of Syrian society. And so this mess is increasingly out of control with no relief in sight.

More ominously, the conflict, which at one point was a struggle within Syria between competing factions with competing visions, has become a regional and international conflict with East/West, Arab/Iranian and sectarian dimensions overlapping. Just as the opposition has drawn support from members of the Arab League, Turkey and the West, the regime has been emboldened by support from Russia, China and Iran.

The most frustrating aspect of the affair is that all involved, and those who are itching to get involved, have little new to add to the equation.

Those who suggest providing more arms to the opposition have failed to answer the fundamental questions: arms to whom, and towards what end? The US assistant secretary of state, Jeffrey Feltman, in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee last week called this “pouring fuel onto a conflagration”, warning of predictable and deadly results.

Allies and suppliers of the regime must also be called to account. Syria has crossed the Rubicon and no amount of repression will restore the old order. More support for the regime only contributes to the suffering of the country and its people.

As the situation continues to spiral out of control, adult supervision is desperately needed. And this is a role that the US, with the Arab League and Turkey, as well as Russia and China, can attempt to play.

With scenario No 4 nowhere in sight, an uneasy truce leading to negotiations that will produce a new governing arrangement may be the best that can be hoped. It may also be the only available alternative to a long and deadly civil war, with destabilising regional consequences.

How to get there?

Both sides will need to be pushed hard. A ceasefire and commitment to negotiations leading to the formation of a new transitional government are essential. At this point, neither the regime nor elements of the opposition will easily accept such an approach. Emboldened by external support, harbouring deep grievances and fears, and believing that victory can still be theirs, they appear eager to fight on. This is where diplomatic intervention is in order.

A good place to start would be as Arab leaders meet their Russian counterparts this week. Their agreement, whatever it costs, to push both sides to give up their unachievable ambitions, would be a first step towards unwinding this conflict.

James Zogby is the president of the Arab American Institute

➔ Follow on Twitter: @AAIUSA

Iran Daily

Assad: Syria Backs Any 'Honest' Peace Bid

Middle East Desk

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad promised international envoy Kofi Annan on Saturday he would back any "honest" peace bid but warned dialogue would fail if "terrorist groups" remained, state media reported.

"Syria is ready to bring success to any honest bid to find a solution," the official SANA news agency quoted Assad as telling Annan in their Damascus talks.

But the Syrian leader added: "No dialogue or political process can succeed as long as there are terrorist groups that are working to sow chaos and destabilize the country by attacking civilians and soldiers."

09 >

Assad: Syria Backs Any 'Honest' Peace Bid

From Page 1

The UN said Annan's task was to call for an immediate ceasefire by the army and the opposition.

Earlier, UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos said "limited progress" had been made on aid but much more was needed.

Annan's talks with Assad lasted for more than two hours, before Annan met Foreign Minister Walid Al-Moallem over lunch.

Syrian state television said the meetings were held in a 'positive' atmosphere.

The SANA news agency quoted Assad as saying: "Syria is ready to make a success of any honest effort to find a solution for the events it is witnessing."

"No political dialogue or political activity can succeed while there are armed terrorist groups operating and spreading chaos and instability."

Ban, the UN Secretary-General, earlier spelled out Annan's task.

"Our priority is, first of all, all violence must stop, whether by government forces [or] opposition forces," Ban said.

"I have very strongly urged Kofi Annan to ensure that there must be an immediate ceasefire."

Ban said Annan would hold talks with other opposition leaders after leaving the country on Sunday.



Coinciding with Annan's arrival, a meeting of Arab League foreign ministers was taking place in Cairo, attended by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Lavrov warned against "crude interference" in Syria's internal affairs. He insisted Russia was not "protecting any regimes" but was trying to "protect international law".

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal said the Russian-Chinese veto of a UN resolution condemning Syria had allowed its 'brutality' to continue.

Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani told the meeting of Arab foreign ministers that it was time to send Arab and foreign troops to Syria.

"The time has come to apply the proposal to send Arab and international troops to Syria," Sheikh Hamad said during a meeting of top diplomats.

Arab foreign ministers meeting in Cairo last month agreed to ask the UN Security Council to issue a decision on the formation of a joint UN-Arab peacekeeping force to oversee the implementation of a ceasefire.

Russia and its diplomatic ally China in February vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian government.

But Moscow is now coming under huge pressure from the West and Arab states to start exerting pressure on Assad's regime and support sanctions against the country.

"When we went to the Security Council, we did not get a resolution because of the Russian-Chinese veto which sent a wrong message to the Syrian regime," Sheikh Hamad said.

"Our patience and the patience of the world have run out," he said.

The UN has pressed for "dialogue" to end the crisis, although Syrian opposition groups have already rejected the idea of talks with President Assad.

Ban also echoed Baroness Amos's calls for Syria to allow aid agencies access to areas badly hit by the violence.