

US to give “non-lethal” aid to Syrian opposition

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US President Barack Obama pledged Sunday to deliver “non-lethal” supplies to Western-backed anti-government insurgents in Syria. The announcement came as Kofi Annan, due to head a United Nations mission to Damascus, was in Moscow for talks with the Russian government on the crisis in Syria.

Obama’s announcement was made following talks with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the eve of the nuclear security conference taking place Monday and Tuesday in Seoul, South Korea. Turkey has played host to Syrian opposition forces, including the main opposition bloc, the Syrian National Council (SNC), and its military wing, the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The US president stated that he and Erdogan agreed that foreign assistance to these armed opposition groups would aid the transition to a “legitimate government.”

The SNC and the FSA have been promoted in the West as the official representatives of opposition to the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. However, the leaderships of these organizations have little popular backing inside Syria, where there are a large number of disparate and fractious armed groups, including Sunni Islamist fighters.

Backed by the Western powers and the Arab monarchies, especially Washington’s allies in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, these opposition forces have failed to win broad support across Syria, especially in the capital, Damascus, and the main economic hub, Aleppo. Rather, the opposition militants resort to terrorist methods and sectarian violence has allowed Assad to present himself as the defender of stability and the rights of non-Sunni minority groups.

Following Obama’s announcement, White House spokesman Ben Rhodes indicated that “strategic communication” equipment would be provided by the

US to opposition forces. “It is important to the opposition as they’re formulating their vision of an inclusive and democratic Syria to have the ability to communicate,” Rhodes told reporters traveling with Obama.

The clear purpose of this type of “non-lethal” materiel is to allow the Syrian opposition to more effectively coordinate its attacks on government forces and institutions. High-tech communications equipment will also enable insurgents operating inside Syria to receive orders from their headquarters in neighboring Turkey and Jordan.

In the event of an international military intervention against Syria, such communication devices will provide the link between fighters on the ground and the warplanes and missiles of foreign armed forces. This would allow a replay of the tactics used during the NATO-led war against Libya last year, when local fighters called in Western air strikes to incinerate the Gaddafi regime’s army.

Obama’s announcement largely undercuts the mission of former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to Syria before it has started. Annan, who has already held talks with the Assad government on behalf of the UN, is due to leave for Syria this week with a team of international observers to study and report on the conflict.

The stated aims of Annan’s mission—brokering a ceasefire, increasing access to humanitarian aid, and initiating a political dialogue between the government and opposition groups—have been rendered next to impossible by Obama’s declaration that the US is openly backing the opposition.

Other concessions called for in Annan’s plan include a “daily two-hour humanitarian pause” to fighting, the release of prisoners held by both sides, and the removal

of restrictions on movement and reporting for foreign journalists inside Syria.

Announcing his mission at a press conference March 16 at the UN office in Geneva, Switzerland, Annan warned against an escalation of the conflict in Syria. “The region is extremely concerned about developments in Syria,” he said. “Their concern goes beyond Syria itself because the crisis can have a serious impact for the whole region if it is not handled effectively.”

Backed by the UN Security Council, Annan’s mission was presented as a compromise measure between the major powers, which are deeply divided over Syria. The United States and its allies in Europe and the Arab League have stoked up the conflict in Syria with the aim of removing President Assad and his Ba’athist regime, as part of a campaign to isolate and weaken Iran, Syria’s principal ally in the region.

This push for regime-change against Syria has been opposed by Russia and China, who view the US-led charge to refashion the energy-rich Middle East as a direct threat to their interests. Russia, in particular, has close economic and security ties to Syria, including billions of dollars in trade and arms deals. The Syrian port of Tartus is home to Russia’s only naval base in the Mediterranean, and Moscow has deployed several warships to the Syrian coast.

The Russian government had presented Annan’s mission as a diplomatic coup for its position. Speaking in Berlin last week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that he was “very glad” that the Security Council had backed Annan’s assignment to Syria, adding that it was a sign that the Western powers and the Arab League had “abandoned ultimatums, abandoned threats and have abandoned attempts to address the problem by making unilateral demands.”

Russia has increased pressure on the Syrian regime to come to a compromise with elements of the opposition, with Lavrov telling the Russian parliament last week that Assad had been too slow to implement reforms. In addition, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov recently announced that talks would be held in Moscow with Syrian oppositionists, including the National Coordination Committee, the second largest opposition bloc in Syria.

The US and its allies viewed the mission by Kofi Annan as a means to get Russia and China to back a

non-binding Security Council resolution calling for Assad’s forces to withdraw from centers of fighting while monitoring takes place, a measure that Washington hopes will provide breathing room for the divided and beleaguered opposition militants.

Assured of the support of Washington and its allies in Europe and the Middle East, the SNC and FSA show no signs of acceding to Annan’s proposed negotiations. An SNC spokesman refused to endorse the Annan mission, claiming that it would “offer the regime the opportunity to push ahead with its repression.” Rather, the insurgency has taken an increasingly bloody form, with opposition elements employing terrorist methods such as suicide bombings of government buildings, the kidnapping and torture of people associated with the Assad regime, and the assassination of state officials.

The US and its client regimes in the Arab League have a record of sponsoring bogus diplomatic missions to Syria. A previous observer delegation under the authority of the Arab League was shut down in January, after only a few weeks in Syria, when its monitors reported that the Assad regime was facing a well-armed insurrection and that opposition claims of casualties inflicted by government forces were grossly exaggerated. Despite the reduction in the death toll during the Arab League’s presence in Syrian cities, Saudi Arabia and Qatar demanded that the mission be closed down while the Gulf sheikdoms ramped up their support for the anti-Assad forces.

The US government’s promise of so-called “non-lethal” aid throws a lifeline to the armed opposition forces in Syria. Anti-Assad militants in Homs, one of the main centers of opposition to the Syrian regime, were routed by government troops this month, though pockets of armed resistance remain.



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