

## Obama signs covert order on Syria

By AGENCIES  
in Washington, New York, Beirut  
and London

US President Barack Obama has signed a covert document authorizing US support for Syrian rebels locked in a battle to overthrow beleaguered Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, reports said on Wednesday.

The directive was contained in a "finding" — a device authorizing clandestine action by the Central Intelligence Agency, NBC and CNN said, citing unidentified sources.

White House officials declined to comment on the reports but did not specifically rule out the idea that Washington was providing more intelligence support to anti-Assad forces than had previously been made public.

Washington has previously said that it is offering medical and communications assistance to Syrian rebels but declined to supply arms, warning it would be counter-productive to further "weaponize" the conflict.

Officials have confided they are wary of sending armaments to groups about which little is known and who some experts fear may eventually display extremist tendencies.

Reports of an increased US role with Syrian rebels came as the violent showdown in Syria appeared to be edging closer to an endgame, and clashes raged between government and opposition forces in Damascus and Aleppo.

They also coincided with rising political pressure on the White House to demonstrate more support for the opposition in Syria, despite US reluctance to become more directly involved in another Middle Eastern war.

It was not clear when Obama signed the secret order. There was no indication however that Washington had changed its overarching policy of not directly providing arms to the rebels.

Syria is in the grip of a conflict now in its 17th month, triggered



A woman walks through rubble from a building in Aleppo that was destroyed by shelling from forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on Wednesday.

GORAN TOMASEVIC / REUTERS

by Assad's repression of a revolt. Western and Arab powers have called for him to step down and allow an orderly transition of power.

Syrian rebels on Thursday bombed a military air base in Aleppo using a tank captured from government troops as activists reported that the regime has unleashed new raids against opposition fighters near the capital Damascus, killing dozens.

The Aleppo report was one of the first indications the rebels

are starting to deploy the heavy weapons they've managed to capture in the past weeks from the Syrian army.

The UN Security Council is scheduled to hear a briefing from UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous on the situation in Syria on Thursday. France, the council president this month, had hoped to organize a ministerial level meeting on Syria but council diplomats said it was unlikely to happen soon.

The UN General Assembly

will meet on Friday to vote on a non-binding Saudi-drafted resolution that criticizes the Security Council for failing to take action on Syria and calls on Assad to step down to allow a political transition.

The assembly meeting had originally been scheduled for Thursday, but diplomats said they needed more time to negotiate on proposed revisions of the text.

The UN Security Council extended the three-month man-

date of the UN observer mission in Syria for another 30 days last month and will have to decide in a few weeks whether to extend it again.

Some Western diplomats say they are loath to keep the mission in Syria given that there is no truce to monitor. But the UN has warned of a worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria.

British Prime Minister David Cameron was scheduled to hold discussions on Thursday in London with Russian President

Vladimir Putin. Reuters said Cameron would push Putin to take a tougher line on Syria and stop blocking Western-backed resolutions aimed at stepping up pressure on Assad. Britain called the decision by Russia and China to veto a resolution two weeks ago "inexcusable and indefensible".

Reuters said Putin is likely to lock horns with Cameron over the issue in Syria.

AFP-REUTERS-AP

## Annan resigns over lack of unity on Syria

By JOHN HEILPRIN in Geneva  
Associated Press

Kofi Annan said on Thursday he will quit his high-profile role as special envoy to Syria at the end of the month, delivering blistering criticism of world powers' failure to unite to stop the country's escalating violence.

Annan told reporters that when he accepted the job, "which some called 'Mission Impossible'" — he wanted to help the international community, led by the UN Security Council, find a peaceful solution to the crisis. The goal was to stop the killings of civilians and human rights abuses, as well as to place Syria on a path toward political transition.

"The severity of the humanitarian costs of the conflict, and the exceptional threats posed by this crisis to international peace and security, justified the attempts to secure a peaceful transition to a political settlement, however daunting the challenge," Annan said.

But the former UN secretary-general told reporters that he cannot go on when the New York-based, 15-nation Security Council doesn't back his role, particularly because of the

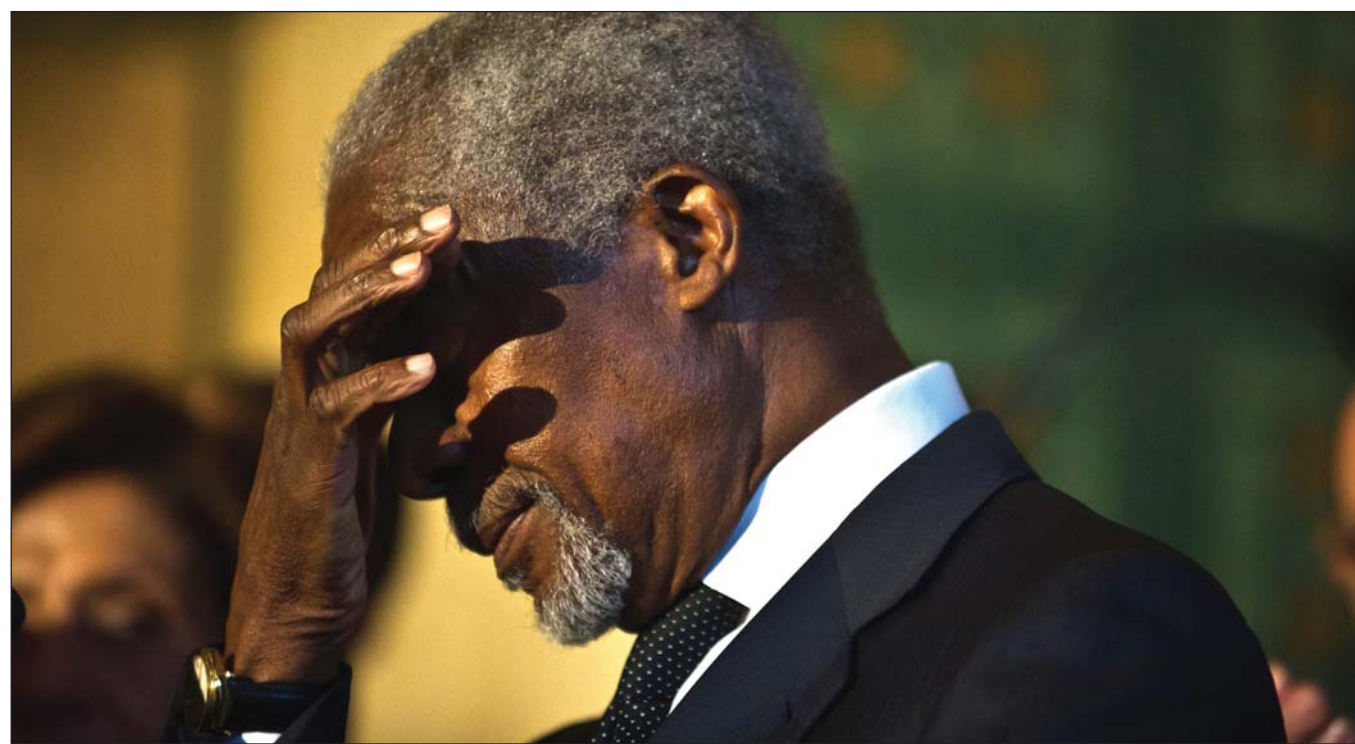
standoff between its five veto-wielding members: Russia and China on one side, the United States, Britain and France on the other.

"Things fell apart in New York," he summed up. "The increasing militarization on the ground (in Syria) and the clear lack of unity in the Security Council have fundamentally changed the circumstances for the effective exercise of my role."

Annan was named the UN-Arab League envoy to Syria in February, overseeing a small staff in a secretive office in the sprawling Palais des Nations, the UN's European headquarters in Geneva. He came up with a six-point peace plan to resolve the crisis in the Arab state, including a cease-fire that was supposed to take effect in mid-April.

But, despite the presence of hundreds of UN observers on the ground, the cease-fire never took hold and the violence in Syria has morphed into a civil war. Rights activists say that more than 19,000 people have died since the popular uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad began in March 2011.

"The bloodshed continues, most of all because of the Syrian government's intransi-



A file photo shows Kofi Annan visiting Egypt on March 8 as the UN-Arab League special envoy to Syria. Annan said on Thursday that he will resign from the post.

LI MUZI / XINHUA

gence, and continuing refusal to implement the six-point plan, and also because of the escalating military campaign of the opposition — all of which is compounded by the disunity of the international community," Annan told reporters in Geneva.

"At a time when we need — when the Syrian people desperately need action — there continues to be finger-pointing and name-calling in the Security Council."

On June 30, Annan succeeded in getting the major powers on the council to agree on a broad framework for a political transition in Syria. But the Security Council never formally endorsed the plan or acted on

it, something that sorely disappointed the envoy and, he said, undermined his efforts.

Annan did not single out any country for criticism, but said, "Without serious, purposeful and united international pressure, including from the powers of the region, it is impossible for me, or anyone, to compel the Syrian government in the first place, and also the opposition, to take the steps necessary to begin a political process."

"You have to understand: as an envoy, I can't want peace more than the protagonists, more than the Security Council or the international community for that matter," he said.

Annan's announcement coincided with Arab countries

dropping a demand that Assad resign in the latest draft of a symbolic UN General Assembly resolution that faces a Friday vote in New York. The watered-down resolution further illustrated the international struggle to build an effective diplomatic approach to Syria's civil war.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said Annan's resignation was evidence that the current approach has failed — and that the UN needs to get tougher with Syria.

"We've got this appalling bloodshed. I think what we need to do is to ramp things up," Cameron told Sky News television.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he accepted the

resignation with deep regret, and is discussing possible successors with the Arab League. "I remain convinced that yet more bloodshed is not the answer; each day of it will only make the solution more difficult while bringing deeper suffering to the country and greater peril to the region," Ban said.

Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin said Moscow also regrets Annan's departure but is encouraged by Ban's search for a successor, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

Asked about the idea of a successor being appointed, Annan said, "The world is full of crazy people like me, so don't be surprised if someone else decides to take it on."

### briefly

#### CHINA Japan's white paper slammed

The Ministry of National Defense on Thursday slammed Japan's annual defense white paper, which denounces China's regular naval operations and exercises and interferes in China's domestic affairs.

Beijing lodged an official protest against the report's accusations over the Chinese military's lack of transparency, and said Tokyo is playing up the China threat to use it as an excuse to enhance Japan's armed forces.

Ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng also warned that Japan's moves have escalated regional tensions over territorial disputes with neighbors, and asked Tokyo to review its military policies and boost mutual trust with neighbors.

#### UNITED STATES Thousands feast to support chain

Thousands of Americans turned out on Wednesday to feast on fried chicken in a politically charged show of support for a family-owned fast-food chain that opposes same-sex marriage.

Long lines and traffic jams were reported throughout the American heartland after 630,000 people declared on Facebook they would take part in a Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day.

The fast-food chain, known for chicken breast sandwiches and nuggets, is under fire from gay rights activists and their supporters who, citing tax records, say it has given millions of dollars to Christian groups that vigorously campaign against marriage equality.

#### AFGHANISTAN Finance chief accused of graft

Afghanistan's top anti-corruption chief said on Thursday the finance minister's business affairs will be investigated after accusations aired on Afghan television that he stashed away more than \$1 million in overseas banks.

Hazarat Omar Zakhilwal, championed by international donors for his integrity in a country mired in graft, over the past five years had transferred the money to accounts in Canada, according to Afghanistan's largest commercial TV channel, Tolo TV.

Tolo showed what it said were his private bank statements on one of its programs.

#### SPAIN Three al-Qaida suspects caught

Three suspected al-Qaida members have been arrested in the south of Spain in possession of explosives, local media reported on Thursday, citing police sources.

According to a report on Cadena Ser radio station, two Chechens, and a Turkish suspect were arrested in Cadiz and Ciudad Real. The Interior Ministry would not confirm the report.

#### EGYPT Morsi to swear in new cabinet

Egypt's Islamist president was scheduled to swear in a new cabinet on Thursday as tensions are rising over the country's tenuous security, recent sectarian violence and growing popular discontent over issues such as widespread water and power outages.

The ceremony comes a little more than a week after President Mohammed Morsi named political novice Hesham Kandil as prime minister. The US-educated Kandil was scheduled to announce the cabinet lineup, and then he and his ministers are to be sworn in by Morsi.

The new government will be Morsi's first since taking office on June 30, succeeding Hosni Mubarak who was ousted in an uprising nearly 18 months ago, and will be scrutinized for signs of whether the new president has kept his promise of a diverse, inclusive cabinet.