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EDITORIALS

An unworkable plan for Syria

Why the U.N.-backed Annan initiative can't succeed

AFTER THE U.N. Security Council endorsed a six-point diplomatic plan for Syria by former secretary general Kofi Annan on Wednesday, U.S. ambassador Susan Rice sounded almost jubilant. “Annan’s proposal,” she said, “is the best way to put an end to the violence, facilitate much-needed humanitarian assistance and advance a Syrian-led political transition.” We can only hope that the envoy does not take her own words too seriously.

In fact, there is virtually no possibility that the new initiative will accomplish any of those aims — as the Obama administration should know by now. Instead, it will likely provide time and cover for the regime of Bashar al-Assad to continue using tanks and artillery to assault Syrian cities and indiscriminately kill civilians. That’s exactly what the regime was doing Thursday — pounding the city of Hama, where at least 20 people have been reported killed in army attacks in the past two days.

The Annan plan won’t work because, like the Arab League plan before it, it calls for the Assad government to take steps that would lead to its swift collapse — and the regime has no intention of capitulating. It says that Syrian forces should stop using heavy weapons in cities, begin a pullback of troops, permit a daily “humanitarian pause” for the delivery of aid and accept a U.N.-supervised cease-fire, while allowing freedom of assembly and the free circulation of journalists. To buy time last year, the regime accepted nearly identical demands by the Arab League,

admitted its monitors — and then proceeded to ignore its obligations completely.

The resolution does provide for Mr. Annan to report back on his progress and for the Security Council to “consider further steps as appropriate.” But thanks to Russia — Mr. Assad’s still-faithful ally — there is no enforcement mechanism. The resolution contains, as Syria’s official news agency pointed out, “no warnings or signals.” Nor does it explicitly call for Mr. Assad’s departure from office. Instead it proposes dialogue between the Syrian government and opposition — something that both sides have repeatedly rejected.

For Russia and China, the Security Council statement offered a face-saving way out of the embarrassing position of appearing to be unconditionally backing Mr. Assad. It gives Moscow hope of achieving the outcome it hopes for: a U.N.-brokered “peace” that leaves the regime in power. For the Obama administration, Mr. Annan’s mission allows the illusion that its diplomatic strategy is producing results — and that more decisive measures, such as arming the opposition or creating a protected zone inside Syria, are unnecessary.

What the Annan mission does not offer is “the best way to put an end to the violence.” It is just the opposite: a guarantee that the bloodshed will continue, and probably worsen. The fighting in Syria will end only when Mr. Assad is forced to stop — or he succeeds in killing his way to victory.