

ARTICLE BY THE RT HON LORD OWEN FOR THE TIMES, MONDAY 16 APRIL 2012

When Governments look to the UN it is usually because they have decided that they themselves cannot solve the conflict. This means that the UN starts, almost by definition, with an immensely difficult, often unsolvable, problem. Ban Ki-Moon, the UN Secretary-General, in calling upon his predecessor Kofi Annan to deal with Syria, chose very wisely. He had to have a negotiator who could command the respect of Russia and China on the Security Council if the deadlock was to be broken.

As Secretary-General Mr Annan managed to keep the trust of all the permanent members over the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Though he owed his position in succeeding Boutros Boutros-Ghali to the Americans, he was ready — against their strongly held view — to say openly that the invasion was illegal. Mr Annan also largely succeeded in the extremely difficult task of negotiating a settlement of ethnic conflict in Kenya.

The Security Council has gone through a very bad period on Syria with entrenched positions and much rhetoric. Re-establishing a sense of common purpose is now essential. Russian haggling has achieved its principle objective, namely not to be sidelined. It is now better placed to manage its considerable interests in the country, but in the process it has paid a heavy price in the Arab world by tolerating savage abuse of human rights.

One hopeful aspect has been the readiness of China in the Security Council to take a slightly different and more reasonable approach than Russia. But for Mr Annan to succeed, there now needs to be a great deal more unity in the Security Council, together with a readiness for the watching world to understand that wars like this do not stop overnight. They have to be unwound carefully, step by step, with frequent setbacks and temporary returns to fighting — which, sadly, we are already seeing.

As so often in the past, it is only the UN that can provide the mechanisms of compromise for winding down a war. Everything depends on slowly building up confidence in the negotiating process itself. A civil war is already gathering momentum. Time is not on the side of the negotiators.

In this delicate situation there is little room for anything that smacks of partition. To define safe areas or demarcate parts of the country for one side or the other is a hazardous course to embark on. Only if the security situation deteriorates again should no-fly zones or outside military intervention be contemplated.

The vexed question of supplying arms has also featured ominously. The normal UN stance is to have a blanket ban but that course, which was taken for good reasons early on in the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia, became bitterly controversial.

It may be possible to stall this issue if the fighting abates. Last week on a private visit to Srebrenica I saw the graves of over 8,000 Muslim men and boys. There are lessons from that horrendous conflict for us all. But Syria is no Bosnia-Herzegovina, nor is it another Libya. It has to be analysed and dealt with in its own context. Russia will have to push President Assad very hard to carry out Mr Annan's proposals for the ending of armed violence and withdrawal of troops from city centres. Without this, the heavy weapons of government forces in urban centres will continue the carnage that has been increasing over the last few months.

After Saturday's Security Council Resolution was passed unanimously it is essential that the 30 UN unarmed monitors arrive quickly if they are not to be discredited, as happened to the monitors from the Arab League. They also need to be of high quality, and very experienced. It looks almost certain that soon another 200 monitors will be needed and then UN armed peacekeepers will probably have to follow. The bulk of these forces will need to come from the region and it would be wise, given the very difficult global politics that exist in and around Syria, for none of the permanent five in the Security Council (America, Russia, China, UK, France) to be a major contributor. The reduction of Iran's influence and the withdrawal of Iranian militia will be crucial. To achieve this, armed UN peacekeeping forces helping to monitor all Syria's borders could be essential. Syria's relationships with its neighbours are extremely complex. Syria is not inextricably politically linked to Iran. Syria came in surprisingly to support the multinational military commission in 1991 to help force Iraq out of Kuwait. But relations today with Iraq are tense. Until the start of the Arab Spring Syria had good relations with Turkey but Recep Tayyip Erdogan, its Prime Minister, only broke with President Assad when it became clear he was not listening to any advice and was determined to attack his own citizens. Syria has to give up interfering in Lebanon. Despite hostility to Israel, Syria has been able to live with its unresolved dispute over the Golan Heights: it is noticeable how the Israeli Government has made very little public comment on Syria, knowing the stakes are very high.

As soon as possible Mr Annan will have to find people with authority in Syria with whom he can negotiate a political settlement — and to sideline President Assad, his brother and some of the political and military leaders whose conduct has been utterly reprehensible. The

Assad family, even if they remain in the country for a while, must no longer be seen as decision-makers.

Civil wars end when people become convinced that they can start to live with each other again. That means an early transitional administration that people can trust and preparations for elections to choose new leaders. It is hoped that Kofi Annan will stay closely involved in the country for a sufficient period to oversee that process.

Lord Owen was Foreign Secretary from 1977 to 1979