

Oral update on the extent of conflict-related deaths in the Syrian Arab Republic

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Statement by Michelle Bachelet UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

24 September 2021

Distinguished President
Excellencies,

Resolution 46/22 requested my Office to resume its work on the extent of civilian casualties in the Syrian Arab Republic, in cooperation with civil society, in order to best assess the number of people killed as a result of 10 years of conflict.

Pursuant to that request, the Office has undertaken complex and painstaking work, collecting data on the number and circumstances in which people have been killed in the course of this terrible conflict.

My update this afternoon will provide an overview of the methodologies employed, and the information we have collected to date.

But first, I want to acknowledge the tremendous commitment and courage of all the individuals who have documented incidents of violence – ensuring that the voices of victims are heard; that those killed are not forgotten; and that information is available for accountability and other processes to pursue victims' rights.

Madam President,

In 2013 and 2014, OHCHR commissioned three statistical analyses of documented killings in Syria. However, the situation in Syria in 2014 grew more complex and dangerous, which affected our capacity to maintain the required standards of quality and verification, and led us to suspend this work. In our last update on this issue, in August 2014, the Office reported that a total of 191,369 individuals had been killed.

In 2019, the Office reinforced its capacity to record civilian casualties and resumed its statistical analysis, in order to include Syria in its global reporting for the Sustainable Development Goals indicator on conflict-related deaths – SDG indicator 16.1.2. Through

this work, we have produced a statistical analysis of people killed. This assessment has encompassed OHCHR's own data, records maintained by civil society organizations, many of them collecting raw data on the ground, as well as information from the Syrian government, which shared records covering part of the 10 years.

Before outlining the figures that result from this work, I would like to emphasize that we followed a strict methodology. Our numbers include only those people identifiable by full name, with an established date of death, and who died in an identified governorate. Any information that did not include these three elements was excluded, and exhaustive review was carried out to prevent duplicate records.

On this basis, we have compiled a list of **350,209 identified individuals** killed in the conflict in Syria between March 2011 to March 2021.

Over one in every 13 was a woman – 26,727 women in all. Almost one in every 13 was a child: 27,126 children, to be exact.

The greatest number of documented killings was recorded in the Governorate of Aleppo, with 51,731 named individuals killed. Other locations with very heavy death tolls were Rural Damascus, with 47,483 deaths; Homs, with 40,986 deaths; Idlib, with 33,271 deaths; Hama, 31,993 deaths; and Tartus, which lost 31,369 people.

Behind each recorded death was a human being, born free and equal, in dignity and rights. We must always make victims' stories visible, both individually and collectively, because the injustice and horror of each of these deaths should compel us to action.

Madam President,

We assess this figure of 350,209 as statistically sound, based as it is on rigorous work. But it is not – and should not be seen as – a complete number of conflict-related killings in Syria during this period. It indicates a minimum verifiable number, and is certainly an under-count of the actual number of killings.

The records that we have received with only partial information – and which were therefore excluded from our analysis – indicate the existence of a wider number of killings that as yet have not been fully documented. Tragically, there are also many other victims who left behind no witnesses or documentation as to their deaths, and whose stories we have not yet been able to uncover.

Excellencies,

My Office has begun processing information on the actors alleged to have caused a number of deaths, together with the civilian and non-civilian status of victims, as well as the cause of death by types of weaponry.

Further analysis is essential, and we require more time and resources to continue this complex work.

We have also begun to apply established statistical estimation techniques to account for missing data, in order to provide a more complete picture of the scale of the conflict and its impact on Syrians. This too will be a longer-term effort, requiring additional resource.

Documenting the identity of and circumstances in which people have died is key to the effective realization of a range of fundamental human rights – to know the truth, to seek accountability, and to pursue effective remedies. It can also facilitate survivors' access to education, health-care and property.

Documenting deaths is directly complementary to efforts to account for missing people. In the context of Syria, we have been assisting families of missing people to effectively engage with international human rights mechanisms.

Given the vast number of missing persons in Syria, I restate my call for the creation of an independent mechanism, with a strong international mandate, to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing people; identify human remains; and provide support to relatives.

Excellencies,

Today, the daily lives of the Syrian people remain scarred by unimaginable suffering.

They have endured a decade of conflict and face deepening economic crisis, as well as the impacts of COVID-19. Extensive destruction of infrastructure has significantly affected the realization of essential economic and social rights. And there is still no end to the violence they endure: just last month, civilians in and around Daraa were exposed to intense fighting and indiscriminate shelling by Government forces and armed opposition groups.

It is incumbent upon us all to listen to the voices of Syria's survivors and victims, and to the stories of those who have now fallen silent for ever.

Thank you Madam President.

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