

Briefing for United Nations Security Council by Navi Pillay, High Commissioner for Human Rights, delivered by Ivan Šimonović, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights: The Situation in the Middle East [Syria], 16 July 2013

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16 July 2013

Mr. President,
Excellencies, Distinguished Members of the Security Council,

Thank you for inviting the Human Rights Office to brief you on the human rights situation in Syria. As you are aware, the increasingly brutal violence in the country has spread significantly.

Casualty Figures

Just over a month ago, OHCHR reported that at least 92,901 people had been killed between March 2011 and the end of April 2013. The analysis used a rigorous methodology, confirming each casualty by name, place, and date of death, and cross-referenced this information in at least three separate sources of data. Out of the 92,901 individuals killed, at least 6,561 were minors, 1,729 of whom were under ten. Children have been documented as being detained, tortured, and executed. They have also been recruited as combatants by armed opposition groups. The Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported that 86 child combatants were killed in hostilities since March 2011. The extremely high rate of killings, approximately 5,000 a month, demonstrates the drastic deterioration of this conflict.

The situation since April 2013

Since April 2013, Government forces and its militias have moved to uproot armed opposition groups from Al-Qusayr and Talkalakh in the Homs governorate, Aleppo, Damascus, and rural Damascus. Government forces carry on with indiscriminate and disproportionate shelling and aerial bombardments, using among other weapons tactical ballistic missiles, cluster and thermobaric bombs, all causing extensive damage and casualties if used in densely populated areas. As a result, hundreds of civilians, including women and children were killed, thousands injured, and tens of thousands displaced. Many displaced in parts of Homs and rural Damascus remain under siege and face miserable humanitarian conditions.

Armed opposition groups have also committed acts of torture, abduction and kidnapping, sometimes along sectarian lines. Killings, violence and threats of reprisals

against civilian populations perceived to be supportive of the Government by armed opposition groups are escalating alarmingly. Many of the armed opposition groups are reportedly engaging in military operations within populated areas endangering civilians, including women and children.

Recent situations of escalating violence – Homs

You just heard the humanitarian consequences of the recent intensification of shelling and ground attacks in central Homs. As the shelling continues, it remains difficult to obtain information on casualties, but it is quite clear that we must not allow a repeat of the suffering, entrapment, and death of civilians that we witnessed in Al-Qusayr. All parties to the conflict must respect their obligations under international law, avoid civilian casualties and allow trapped civilians to leave without fear of persecution or violence. Immediate humanitarian access should be granted to all conflict-affected populations in besieged areas. We join calls on States to maintain an open border policy for refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict. We should not wait to encourage humanitarian negotiations between the two sides to alleviate the most acute suffering. Humanitarian contacts are not only vital in their own right; they can also sow the seeds for political negotiations in the longer run.

Massacres

In Syria today, serious human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity are the rule. In its latest report, the Commission of Inquiry noted that a number of incidents, potentially amounting to massacres, took place between January and May 2013. HRO has received personal accounts of survivors of the massacres by Government forces and affiliated militias which took place between 2 and 3 May 2013 in the village of Al-Bayda and the Baniyas neighbourhood of Ras Al-Nabaa, both in the governorate of Tartus. According to survivors interviewed by HRO, the massacre in Al-Bayda resulted in at least two hundred deaths, including entire families, women, and children some of whom appeared to have been mutilated and burned. In Ras-Al-Nabaa, residents trying to flee under intense shelling before the massacre took place, were reportedly intercepted at government checkpoints and forced to return, in some cases to their deaths.

Sectarianism and Regional dimension

HRO continues to investigate equally disturbing allegations of killings along sectarian lines reportedly carried out by armed opposition groups. Large-scale displacement, including across the border, on the basis of religious or other affiliations is a worrying indicator that inter-communal massacres are now a real risk. HRO is concerned over the use of rhetoric by religious and political leaders in Syria and the region, exacerbating existing sectarian tensions which can lead to more violence and large scale atrocities. All leaders have a responsibility to refrain from using or condoning language that may escalate sectarian tension. States must take action to prevent incitement to violence on any grounds.

The continuous influx of foreign fighters into Syria, to support both sides, remains of

great concern and fuels the conflict further. The return of foreign fighters in body bags is exacerbating sectarian tension in surrounding States, and endangering the security of the region. States should discourage the movement of foreign fighters into Syria.

Conclusions

The supply of weapons to both sides must stop. The solution should be political, not military. States with influence over the parties must work to support an inclusive, Syrian-led political solution to this conflict.

Parties must initiate immediate negotiations to reduce violence and human rights violations, and improve the protection of civilians. Progress in these areas can build confidence between the Government, armed opposition groups, and local communities, and open the political dialogue.

We fully support the Secretary-General's call for a truce during Ramadan, and call on all parties to put down their arms, immediately cease acts of violence against civilians and protect them from hostilities, in compliance with international law.

Throughout continuing efforts to bring peace, we should seek to uphold justice and accountability. War crimes, crimes against humanity, and gross human rights violations must not go unpunished. To this end, HRO once again urges the Security Council to refer the Syrian crisis to the International Criminal Court.

We urge the Syrian Government to facilitate access for HRO staff and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria to the country. Through fact-finding and human rights monitoring, these teams can provide impartial substantive analysis to protect human rights.

Thank you.

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