

# Both sides in Syria ‘increasingly reckless’ with civilian lives – independent UN panel

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The violence in Syria has reached “new heights of destruction,” independent United Nations human rights investigators today said, presenting a new report which urges a political solution to what has become an increasingly militarized and sectarian conflict.

“There is an urgent need for a sustained diplomatic initiative to put an end to the violence and the suffering of the Syrian population,” the Chair of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, Paulo Pinheiro, told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

“If the national, regional, and international actors fail to find a solution to the conflict and stop the agony of millions of civilians, the alternative will be the political, economic and social destruction of Syria and its society, with devastating implications for the region and the world,” Mr. Pinheiro warned, speaking on behalf of the four-member Commission.

He added that “the war displays all the signs of a destructive stalemate” where neither the Government nor anti-Government forces have been able to prevail militarily and are thus escalating force “in the fallacious belief that victory is within reach.”

In the report presented by Mr. Pinheiro, the Commission concluded that the main cause of civilian casualties, mass displacement and destruction “is the reckless manner in which parties to the conflict conduct hostilities,” including indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombardment.

“The parties must take all feasible precautions to protect civilians,” the Commission urges, reiterating that the conflict is waged by both Government forces and anti-Government armed groups in violation of international humanitarian law.

The 10-page update, which is based on first-hand accounts from 191 interviews conducted last month, describes a dramatic erosion of civilian space with mass displacement exacerbated by diminishing areas in which civilians can seek refuge.

Up to 70,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad began in March 2011 and about a million people have fled to neighbouring countries. In addition, 2 million have been internally displaced and over 4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.

The report notes in particular the use of medical care as a tactic of war. Medical personnel and hospitals have been deliberately targeted and are treated by parties to the conflict as military objectives, the Commission notes, adding that medical access has been denied in certain cases “on real or perceived political and sectarian grounds.”

In addition, the human rights investigations call attention to so-called “Popular Committees,” which comprise local residents who reportedly protect their neighbourhoods against anti-Government armed groups and criminal gangs.

“In a disturbing and dangerous trend, mass killings allegedly perpetrated by Popular Committees have at times taken on sectarian overtones,” the Commission writes.

The report also notes at least three massacres reportedly committed in Homs governate since December 2012, noting that the bodies of those killed or executed are often desecrated, by being burned or dumped in waterways, making identification difficult. Despite a lack of access, the Commission said it is investigating approximately 20 cases of alleged massacres.

In a sign of the increasing recklessness with which the parties to the conflict treat human life, Mr. Pinheiro noted in his statement the capture and detention of 21 UN peacekeepers by the Martyrs of Yarmouk armed group last week in the Golan Heights.

“We welcome their safe release,” Mr. Pinheiro said, but noted that members of the Commission also “condemn such outrageous acts and consider it a clear violation of international humanitarian law.”

In addition, the report cites the use of child fighters, some recruited as young as 13 by anti-Government forces for weapons training and operational roles; while there are instances of Syrian boys as young as 12 being pushed to support Government troops.

There are also reports of sexual violence, including at checkpoints or while being held by intelligence agencies.

“A failure to resolve this increasingly violent conflict will condemn Syria, the region and the millions of civilians caught in the crossfire to an unimaginably bleak future,” the Commission summarizes, urging all stakeholders to redouble their efforts to facilitate a negotiated settlement.

“The latest initiative by the UN and Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria suggesting that the UN is willing to facilitate negotiations between the parties represents a step in the right direction and deserves to be supported,” the Commission, which also includes

Karen Koning AbuZayd, Carla del Ponte and Vitit Muntarbhorn, writes in the report.

Last week, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi met in Mt. Pelerin, Switzerland, to discuss the situation in Syria. They reiterated that the UN would welcome and be prepared to facilitate a dialogue between a strong and representative delegation from the opposition and a credible and empowered delegation from the Syrian Government.





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