

Statement by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic on the urgent need to protect civilians living amidst on-going attacks on Aleppo city

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GENEVA (16 August 2016) - The Commission is gravely concerned for the safety of civilians, including a reported 100,000 children, living in eastern Aleppo city, where violence has reached new heights in recent weeks as asymmetric warfare intensifies over control of armed group-held neighbourhoods and their principal remaining supply lines, currently the Castello road and access through Ramouseh neighbourhood. These attacks appear to form the prelude to a siege, designed to force the capture of the city through an already-documented strategy of 'surrender or starve'. The situation of civilians in Aleppo city is critical and demands immediate attention and response.

Neighbourhoods of Aleppo city are now being pounded daily by aerial bombardments by Government and pro-Government forces, causing mass civilian casualties. Civilians have been killed by the strikes, while others have died after being trapped under rubble of collapsed buildings surrounding impact sites. Subsequent strikes have killed first responders, including members of the Syrian Civil Defence, as they attempted to rescue survivors.

Over twenty-five hospitals and clinics have been destroyed in aerial bombardments since January 2016. Attacks have killed patients and much-needed medical staff. Among the healthcare facilities destroyed are maternity hospitals, paediatric units and emergency wards. Earlier in the year, airstrikes and barrel bombs destroyed markets, bakeries, and water pumping stations. Two million civilians in Aleppo currently lack access to running water. Those inside the armed group-held neighbourhoods describe lives of horror, under near-constant threat of death from airstrikes. There is limited food, water, and supplies for babies and infants. Access to medical care in these areas is largely non-existent.

Humanitarian corridors, if put in place, must be set up and implemented in a manner that complies with key humanitarian principles. Civilians who choose to remain must have unhindered access to life-saving humanitarian assistance. Regardless of the existence of humanitarian corridors, the warring parties' legal obligation not to direct attacks against civilians and civilian targets remains.

Scores of civilians in Government-held areas of Aleppo city are being killed by the indiscriminate ground shelling of armed groups, as coalitions including Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, and the terrorist group Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (previously Jabhat al-Nusra) mount their counteroffensive against Government attack.

The situation in Aleppo city has been catastrophic for many years. As unthinkable as it is, the current attacks suggest the agony of its civilians is about to deepen.

War has rules. The Commission urges the warring parties to conduct themselves in accordance with international law. The Commission emphasises, however, that the attacks on Aleppo city, even if in accordance with the laws of war, will only further devastate the civilian population. As attacks continue across the Syrian Arab Republic, the Commission urges States with influence, particularly those supporting parties to the conflict, to pressure a return to political negotiations. Until that time, and before our eyes, Syrian men, women and children continue to pay the highest price.

The Commission comprises Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (Chair), Ms. Carla Del Ponte, Mr. Vitit Muntarbhorn, and Ms. Karen Koning AbuZayd. The Commission's next report, which examines violations of international law in the Syrian Arab Republic between January and July 2016, will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council on 19 September 2016.