

# Opening Remarks by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic made at Press Conference

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Geneva, 1 March 2017

Good afternoon.

My colleague Carla del Ponte and I are here to launch our 13th report to the Human Rights Council. Pursuant to the special session of the Human Rights Council in late October last year and the resolution that resulted, this report focuses exclusively on the events in Aleppo. By Aleppo, we mean the situation in Aleppo city and its surrounding areas from mid-July until late December 2016.

As is our practice – and mandate - the Commission investigated allegations of violations by all sides in an independent and impartial manner. We interviewed over 290 civilian victims and witnesses on all sides of the fighting. Sadly, once more, it was the civilians that paid *the price* for the extreme violence waged by the warring parties. Civilians in Aleppo were not just caught in the line of fire. More often than not, they were the target.

For months, the Syrian and Russian air forces relentlessly bombarded eastern Aleppo city as part of a strategy to force surrender. Hospitals, orphanages, markets, schools and homes were all but obliterated. Unable to leave after pro-Government forces laid siege to eastern Aleppo in July, hundreds of civilians, many of them children, lost their lives to the daily bombardments that used concrete-piercing bombs, cluster munitions, incendiary weapons and crudely weaponised chlorine canisters on civilian-inhabited areas.

Continuous shelling fired by armed groups into western Aleppo city and Sheikh Maqsoud, killed and maimed countless civilians. The use of improvised weapons and lack of clear military targets shows these were indiscriminate attacks carried out to terrorise the civilian population.

No one is safe from attack in Syria. In one of, if not the most, egregious attacks investigated by the Commission, the Syrian Air Force ruthlessly targeted a United Nations/Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy as it prepared to deliver aid to opposition-held areas. Almost no one was left unscathed: 14 aid workers were killed, most of the remaining ones were injured. 17 trucks of much-needed aid items were destroyed. Civilians all across Syria suffered from the suspension of delivery of humanitarian aid that ensued.

As the recapture of eastern Aleppo became inevitable, some armed groups prevented civilians from leaving, effectively using them as human shields. The final evacuation agreement for eastern Aleppo resulted in the removal of the entire population of the effected districts, not just the fighters who negotiated and agreed to its terms. Such

agreements, which amount to forced displacement, are not a new phenomenon. Rather, they have become the all too common blueprint for how sieges end in Syria. They exemplify how civilian populations are used by the warring parties for political and military gains.

I should note that the Commission remains extremely concerned by the financial and logistic support received by parties to the conflict, in particular armed groups, from both individuals and from Member States that helps drive this grinding and increasingly complex conflict. States in particular must ensure that any party to the conflict in receipt of their financial, material or direct support adhere to the laws of war, or they risk being complicit in such crimes as well.

What happened in Aleppo is not new. The Commission has long documented how similar violations, including the use of sieges and aerial attacks, have been employed cynically to force the surrender of armed opponents and any civilians unfortunate enough to be caught in their areas of control. But the scale of what happened in Aleppo is unprecedented in the Syrian conflict. Much of Aleppo, once Syria's biggest city and its commercial and cultural centre and a UNESCO World Heritage site, has been reduced to rubble. Over 100,000 people have been displaced and are struggling to survive.

What happened in Aleppo shows how much the warring parties disregard international law and how little they fear accountability. We hope that our report not only documents the events in Aleppo, but also that it helps to ensure that those responsible for this ruinous situation are brought to justice.

We welcome your questions.