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Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Amid the ruins of Ar-Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr, calls for justice and accountability by victims and families must be urgently addressed

GENEVA, 6 March 2018 – Over the last eight months, victims of the Syrian conflict have suffered greatly as violence countrywide re-escalated to new heights, according to the latest report by the UN mandated Commission of Inquiry. The report chronicles violations that occurred between July 2017 and January 2018, including from military campaigns that toppled the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Ar-Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr, which led to the destruction of large swathes of civilian infrastructure and housing as well as the deaths of an untold number of victims.

Notably, the Commission also documented the rising violence in Idlib governorate and eastern Ghouta which has been the focus of the international community for much of the first two months of 2018.

The report further stresses the need for the international community to take a broader view of accountability and to take more practical, urgent steps to ensure victims' needs for justice and accountability are met both immediately and in the longer term. Drawing from over 500 interviews, the report underscores the complete impunity of perpetrators by chronicling crimes and violations perpetrated by all parties to the conflict – including deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and protected objects, starvation, unlawful internment, and the use of chemical weapons.

"It is beyond comprehension that, despite this extensive range of violations, Syrian victims and survivors continue to be denied any meaningful justice," said Commission Chair Paulo Pinheiro. "Remedies which go beyond calls for criminal justice and address, for example, the situation of tens of thousands of detainees or account for those who have been disappeared or abducted must be given greater attention." Recommendations in the report include a call for the immediate release of children, women, the elderly, and disabled, and access by independent monitors to all places of detention, including those established by armed groups.

While offensives to defeat ISIL in Ar-Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr appear to have successfully dislodged the terrorist group, the battles came at an extremely high cost to civilians. Even before the campaign to take Ar-Raqqah city began, the international coalition failed to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects, in violation of international humanitarian law, when it launched an airstrike in al-Mansoura which killed at least 150 internally displaced persons, including women and children. Trapped in an effectively besieged city, residents of Ar-Raqqah were later used by ISIL as human shields, as were others in Dayr al-Zawr.

Aerial and ground operations to defeat ISIL further triggered one of the single largest waves of internally displaced persons since the inception of the conflict. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian men, women, and children from Ar-Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr fled clashes only to relocate to desert camps in northern Syria. There, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are interning up to 80,000 internally displaced persons to vet them for possible connections to ISIL.

"The blanket internment of all IDPs from Raqqah and Dayr al-Zawr cannot be justified by the SDF," said Commissioner Karen AbuZayd. "These IDP camps lack adequate resources and are only compounding their suffering. Those civilians who wish to leave must be immediately released," she added. SDF violations noted in the report also include forced conscription, including of children.

Elsewhere across Syria, places of worship, civil defence centres, homes, medical facilities, markets, bakeries, and schools continue to be regularly attacked with impunity by warring parties.

In one particularly harmful attack on 13 November, the Russian Air Force carried out airstrikes on a densely populated civilian area in Atareb (Aleppo), killing at least 84 people and injuring another 150. Using unguided weapons, the attack struck a market, police station, shops, and a restaurant, and may amount to a war crime.

Entering its fifth year, the siege of eastern Ghouta has been characterised by increasingly cynical means and methods of warfare, which have led to the worst documented cases of severe acute malnutrition over the course of the Syrian conflict. The siege continues to be marked by indiscriminate attacks affecting civilian and protected objects, the use of chemical weapons and cluster munitions, starvation, and the routine denial of medical evacuations. Terrorist or armed groups within the enclave continued to indiscriminately shell Damascus city, amounting to war crimes killing and maiming scores of civilians.

"Even if the state is engaged in combatting terrorism, as it has stated, there can be no justification for punishing a whole population through starvation, indiscriminate bombardment, and denial of medical and humanitarian relief," said Commissioner Hanny Megally. "This whole conflict has been characterized by a total disregard for the rules of war. All parties must immediately lift all sieges, allow humanitarian access, and stop using strategies that primarily target civilians," he added.

Background

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which comprises Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (Chair), Ms. Karen Koning AbuZayd, and Mr. Hanny Megally has been mandated by the United Nations Human Rights Council to investigate and record all violations of international law since March 2011 in the Syrian Arab Republic.

The full report and supporting documentation can be found on the Human Rights Council web page dedicated to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>

The report is scheduled to be presented on 13 March during an interactive dialogue at the 37th session of the Human Rights Council.

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