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Syria: Fuel-Air Bombs Strike School

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A Syrian government airstrike using fuel-air explosive bombs hit outside a secondary school in the opposition-held city of Raqqa on September 29, 2013, killing at least 14 civilians. At least 12 of those killed were students attending their first day of classes.

A Raqqa resident who went to the school immediately after the attack told Human Rights Watch that he saw 14 bodies, including some without limbs. A doctor from National Hospital in Raqqa said he saw 12 dead bodies, most of them students, and the hospital treated 25 wounded.

The blast wounds and flash burns visible on victims in videos and photographs, coupled with the body positions and few shrapnel wounds, indicates the use of fuel-air explosives (FAE), also known as "vacuum bombs," Human Rights Watch said. More powerful than conventional high-explosive munitions of comparable size, fuel-air explosives inflict extensive damage over a wide area, and are therefore prone to indiscriminate impact in populated areas.

"While the world tries to bring Syria's chemical weapons under control, government forces are killing civilians with other extremely powerful weapons," said Priyanka Motaparthi, Middle East child rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Even students on their first day of school are not safe."

Fuel-air explosive bombs are not an incendiary or chemical weapon. But because of their wide area effects, which make them highly indiscriminate weapons, Human Rights Watch believes fuel-air explosives should never be used in populated areas.

Two other Raqqa residents, a lawyer and an opposition activist, told Human Rights Watch that a government jet dropped bombs that struck the courtyard of the Ibn Tufail Commercial Secondary School at approximately 8:05 a.m. They said no armed people were in or around the school and no opposition administration offices or headquarters were nearby. Before the start of the school year, the school had housed a few hundred internally displaced people from the Aleppo area.

Videos and photos from the site show two impact craters between 10 and 14 meters apart in the southwest corner of the courtyard near the main gate. Both craters are between 2 and 3 meters in

diameter and 30 to 60 centimeters deep, which is consistent with an air-burst FAE that does not explode on impact with the ground.

Satellite imagery taken on September 26 shows that the school is surrounded by fields and a few small houses, with no visible signs of military structures or activity. That increases the likelihood that the government targeted the school itself, Human Rights Watch said.

Raqqa, about 160 kilometres east of Aleppo, has experienced frequent government bombing since opposition forces captured the city in March. Various armed opposition groups controlled the city at first, but recently the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and Sham has gradually strengthened its control.

Human Rights Watch visited Raqqa in April, but has not been able to return due to security concerns.

The opposition activist told Human Rights Watch that he arrived at the three-story school minutes after the attack:

We heard the sound of a plane at exactly 8 a.m., and after a few seconds we heard the explosions. We went to the site after we identified it by the smoke rising from the scene. We got there after four to six minutes. Corpses were strewn on the ground and people were in a state of severe panic.

The lawyer, who also arrived a few minutes after the attack, said he saw the bodies of many boys between the ages of 15 and 17 and also some girls, plus a school janitor. He told Human Rights Watch:

Their body parts were scattered all over the place. They were just shreds, not full bodies, just pieces: the hand one place, the other body parts somewhere else. One head was severed from the body. One of them had the intestines coming out. Their books and notebooks were all over the place.

The opposition-run Raqqa Media Center said the attack killed 15 people, 14 of them students, and published a list of 13 names. At least 20 other people were wounded, the center said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the attack killed 16 people, including 10 students.

The doctor told Human Rights Watch that he treated three people who died, two of them from brain injuries and one from internal injuries. Some of the wounded had shrapnel in their chests and stomachs, he said. Two other hospital doctors, interviewed separately, gave accounts of treating victims with burns, internal injuries and shrapnel.

Videos and photos of victims and the site taken just after the strike show the distinctive signs of a fuel-air explosive bomb, Human Rights Watch said. The burned skin and trauma wounds appear to be from flash burns and a blast wave rather than the shrapnel wounds associated with conventional explosive munitions. Some of the bodies were apparently thrown against the courtyard wall, which suggests they were forced there by the blast wind.

One such weapon in the government's arsenal is the ODAB-series fuel-air bomb. Syria is known to have used this weapon in the current conflict since 2012.

Human Rights Watch has extensively documented repeated indiscriminate, and in some cases deliberate, government airstrikes against civilians, including attacks on schools that killed children. These attacks are serious violations of international humanitarian law (the laws of war), and individuals who intentionally commit such violations are responsible for war crimes.

A June Human Rights Watch report documented how Syrian government forces fired on school buildings that were not being used for military purposes in both ground and air attacks.

As of December 2012, at least one in five Syrian schools no longer functioned, with thousands of schools destroyed, damaged, or sheltering people who had fled violence. Enrollment rates had dropped to 14 percent in governorates where fighting was particularly intense, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

"The Raqqa bombing is the latest in a long string of government attacks that hit schools and killed students," Motaparthi said. "These attacks have cost many children their lives, and have taught others that they risk death by going to school."

List of dead in September 29, 2013 attack according to the Raqqa Media Center:

1. Ali Abu Hussein, 45-year-old janitor
2. Ahmed Khadr al-Faraj
3. Abdullah al-Nafa'a
4. Hassan al-Barjes
5. Rose al-Hassan al-Hussein
6. Ibtisam al-Hassoun al-Shuwaikh
7. Ali al-Shabib
8. Mohammed Rassoul al-Ibrahim
9. Ali Homaidy al-Ali al-Hussein
10. Mohammed Tareq al-Batran
11. Anwar al-Hassan al-Taher
12. Ammar al-Sheikh
13. Mahmoud Fady al-Awwad

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