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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Syria

By the end of 2011, the Syrian revolution had entered its ninth month with no sign of the Assad government backing down on its excessive use of violence against protesters and opposition activists. The UN estimated that more than 5,000 people had been killed in the government's crackdown on protests by the end of the year. The increased militarization of the conflict, and Syria's sectarian composition have raised fears that civil war will erupt between the minority Alawites, the sect that President Bashar al-Assad's family belong to and whose members arguably dominate positions of power, and the majority Sunnis. Previous MRG reports have not considered Alawites as a threatened minority, given their elevated position in the regime apparatus, but their close identification with the Assad regime puts them in danger of revenge attacks should the government fall. While there have been worries concerning the possible vulnerable situation of Syria's Christians, who make up between 7 and 9 per cent of the population, MRG did not receive any reports of attacks directed against that community during the year.

Kurds are the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in Syria, estimated at 1.7 million or about 10 per cent of the country's population. Since independence, the Syrian government has sought to eliminate Kurdish identity in Syria by institutionalizing discrimination and racism against them. The 1962 census stripped around 120,000 Kurds of citizenship, amid accusations they were foreigners and thus registered illegally. HRW and other NGOs estimate that there are around 300,000 stateless Kurds living in Syria today.

When the Syrian uprising began, the Assad government sought to placate minorities in Syria and in April issued a decree granting Kurds citizenship. As the citizenship process includes an interview with the state security apparatus, which entails interrogation and intimidation, few Kurds are willing to go through with it. Young Kurdish men who did apply for citizenship were asked to do military service, which might entail joining the army against the protesters.

Since the 1960s, the Syrian government has confiscated many Kurdish lands on the borders with Turkey and Iraq to create the so-called Arab Belt. Bedouin Arabs were brought in and resettled in Kurdish areas. Although Kurdish farmers were dispossessed of their lands, they refused to move and give up their houses.

Years of drought have now exacerbated the situation of Kurds in the northern Hasakeh governate, where the majority of stateless Kurds live. The region has vast arable lands and is the principal producer of cotton, oil, lentils, wheat and barley. But reduced rainfall has decreased the arable land available for cultivation and caused desertification. The result has been reduced agricultural production and a decline in the regional and national economy. The Ministry of Agriculture says that 40,000-60,000 families have migrated from Hasakeh, but Kurdish analysts say that the number is much higher; 30,000 families have left Kamishli city alone. The Syrian government has been slow to respond to the dire agricultural and economic situation of the region.

Kurdish areas initially did not witness many protests for two reasons; at the beginning of the year, the Assad government was quick to reach a rapprochement with the Democratic Union Party, the Syrian branch of the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), allowing them to set up cultural centres and schools in Kurdish regions. However, the Kurdistan National Assembly of Syria, composed of 11 parties, is aligned with the Syrian opposition.

Secondly, Kurdish parties have been wary of the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), since

its leader, Bourhan Ghalyoun, had stressed the 'Arab' nature of Syria, and Kurds have distrusted the SNC's relations with Turkey, fearing they will quash their demands for full civil and political rights.

But some Kurds did participate in the uprising. Since March 2011, Kurdish activists have been arrested due to their participation in the opposition local coordination committees. Leading Kurdish activist Mashaal Tammu was killed on 7 October, when armed men forced him out of a house during a meeting with activists and shot him dead. His funeral, which turned into the biggest demonstration in the Kurdish areas since the uprising began, was attended by 50,000 people. State security forces fired on protesters, killing six and wounding several others.

Amid the violence, many Iraqi refugees in Syria no longer felt safe, fearing the very sectarian violence they had escaped from at home; but many were also uncertain about returning to Iraq where instability and violence continues. There are approximately 1 million Iraqi refugees in Syria – over 100,000 of them are registered with the UNHCR.

In June 2011, clashes broke out in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp near Damascus between residents and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, backed by the Assad regime. Approximately 20 people died, according to Palestinian sources.

In August 2011, UNRWA reported that over 5,000 Palestinian refugees had fled a camp in Lattakia after the Syrian army attacked the area. At least 4 people died with 20 injured. UNRWA said that some refugees had been told by the Syrian authorities to leave. The situation at the camp was described as alarming. According to UNRWA, more than 486,000 Palestinian refugees live in nine official and three unofficial camps across Syria. Although Palestinian refugees enjoy many of the rights of Syrian citizens, UNRWA reported that they lag behind in key areas, such as infant mortality and school enrolment.

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