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OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Syria: Bachelet alarmed by upsurge in attacks and civilian casualties in Idlib

GENEVA (19 February 2019) – The intensified ground-based bombardment of Idlib and surrounding areas by government forces and their allies in recent weeks, coupled with a series of attacks by non-State actors, has led to numerous civilian casualties and left some one million people, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in an extremely vulnerable situation, the UN Human Rights Chief said on Tuesday.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called on all parties involved, as well as external governments with influence, to ensure that the protection of civilians is held paramount in the planning and execution of all military operations in accordance with international law.

The bombardment of the "demilitarized buffer zone" that includes Idlib and areas of northern Hama and western Aleppo Governorates started to escalate in December 2018 and has further intensified in recent days. At the same time, there has been an increase of infighting amongst non-State actors and in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in areas they control, including by the extremist group, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS).

While a comprehensive count of civilian casualties has not been possible, credible reports of specific incidents that led to civilian casualties include the following:

- *29 January:* 11 civilians, including a woman and a boy, killed and nine others injured in ground-based bombardment that hit residential neighborhoods and a local market in Ma'arrat An Numan, in southern Idlib Governorate
- *11 February:* a girl killed in the city of al-Dana in northern Idlib Governorate, reportedly in crossfire between ISIL and HTS fighters.
- *12 February:* 11 civilians, including a boy, killed by shelling in different areas of Ma'arrat An Numan district in southeastern Idlib.
- *15 February:* at least four civilians including two women were killed and nine civilians including four women and five children (three boys and two girls) injured as a result of bombardment of Khan Shaykun.
- *16 February:* five civilians, including two women and two boys, reportedly killed by ground-based strikes that hit Khan Shaykun in southern Idlib.

- Yesterday, *18 February*: 16 civilians – including women and children – were reported killed, and more than 70 injured, in the Qusour neighbourhood of Idlib, by two explosive devices, the second of which appears to have been designed to kill and maim people, including medical workers, trying to aid the victims of the first bomb.

"Large numbers of civilians, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in Idlib and northern Aleppo are living an intolerable existence," said Bachelet. "They are trapped between the escalation of hostilities and bombardment on the one hand, and, on the other, are forced to live under the extremist rule of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and other extremist fighters who regularly carry out targeted killings, abductions and arbitrary detention."

"I urge all the parties involved to, first and foremost, ensure that civilians themselves, and civilian infrastructure, are protected as required by international humanitarian and international human rights law," the High Commissioner said. "The principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution must be fully respected, and military objects must not be placed in the vicinity of civilians."

Bachelet also expressed concern about the wellbeing of some 20,000 people who fled ISIL controlled areas in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate in recent weeks and are now being held in makeshift IDPs camps run by Kurdish armed groups including the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are reported to be preventing IDPs from leaving the camps in what appears to amount to deprivation of liberty.

The High Commissioner said she remains particularly concerned about the situation of some 200 families, including many women and children, who are reportedly trapped in the tiny area still under the control of ISIL. Many of them are apparently being actively prevented from leaving by ISIL and continue to be subjected to intensified air and ground-based strikes by the US led Coalition forces and their SDF allies on the ground.

"Civilians continue to be used as pawns by the various parties," Bachelet said. "I call on them to provide safe passage to those who wish to flee, while those who wish to remain must also be protected as much as possible. They should not be sacrificed to ideology on the one hand, or military expediency on the other. If protecting civilian lives means taking a few more days to capture the last fraction of land controlled by ISIL, then so be it."

ENDS

ecoi.net summary:

Idlib: Several civilian casualties in attacks carried out by regime forces, their allies and non-state actors



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