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As Iraqi military prepares to enter Mosul, ISIL forcibly relocates thousands of civilians near city, UN warns

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1 November 2016 - The United Nations human rights wing today received reports that the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) is attempting to forcibly transfer tens of thousands of civilians closer to Mosul, including near its own military installations, which could be targets as the Iraqi Government's offensive to retake the city intensifies.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that early this morning, ISIL attempted the forcible transfer of some 25,000 civilians towards locations in and around Mosul. While coalition flights patrolling the area foiled the effort, some buses did reach Abusaif, 15 kilometres north of Hamam Al-Alil City, south of Mosul.

"We have grave concerns for the safety of these and the tens of thousands of other civilians who have reportedly been forcibly relocated by ISIL in the past two weeks," OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani told reporters at the regular bi-weekly press briefing in Geneva, explaining that ISIL brought dozens of long trucks and mini-buses to Hamam al-Alil City - most of which were prevented from proceeding towards Mosul by coalition flights.

Responding to questions, she said OHCHR had observed a pattern: ISIL was taking people closer and closer to Mosul city, and putting them close to their offices and to military installations which could be targets.

"That would support the assertion that they are planning to use those people as human shields, and to make sure the area was heavily populated with civilians to frustrate a military operation against them," she said, noting that ISIL is also killing some people that they are abducting, particularly those having formerly belonged to the Iraqi Security Forces.



A young girl stands outside her family home in al Houd, a town outside Mosul, which was retaken by Iraqi security forces. Photo: UNICEF/Sharon Behn

"Using civilians as human shields is a war crime," she explained, citing relevant Articles of the Rome Statute, founding document of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which state, respectively, that taking hostages in a non-international armed conflict is a war crime, and that ordering civilian displacements for reasons non-security or imperative military reasons is also a war crime.

"We urge parties to the conflict to ensure that international law is strictly observed," continued Ms. Shamdasani, "in particular the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution in attack. All feasible precautions must be taken to avoid and minimise the loss of civilian life and injury to civilians."

The OHCHR spokesperson elaborated on further reports of mass killings by ISIL, noting that this past Saturday, 40 former Iraqi Security Force soldiers were killed and their bodies thrown in the Tigris River. The soldiers were reportedly among the civilians who had been abducted earlier from al-Shura sub-district of Mosul and from villages surrounding Hamam al-Alil.

According to Ms. Shamdasani, there have also been reports that ISIL has been threatening relatives of people they suspect are supporting the Iraqi Security Forces.

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