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1321

988

33

UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria Condemns Upsurge in Violence in the Idlib Governorate and eastern Ghouta: Syrian Arab Republic

[Back](#)

Geneva, 6 February 2018 – The United Nations mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic expressed deep concern over the further escalation of violence in Idlib governorate and in eastern Ghouta. Over the last 48 hours, the scale and ferocity of attacks has increased dramatically resulting in multiple reports of civilian casualties and airstrikes that have reportedly hit at least three hospitals, including in Ma'aret al Nu'man, Kafr Nabl and Mardikh.

Since the beginning of the year, the increase in violence in Idlib has resulted in another upsurge of internal displacement with over a quarter of a million civilians reportedly fleeing the fighting, according to reports received by the Commission

“These reports are extremely troubling, and make a mockery of the so-called “de-escalation zones” intended to protect civilians from such bombardment,” said Paulo Pinheiro, Chair of the Commission. “The parties to this conflict are failing in their obligations under international humanitarian law, including their absolute obligation to refrain from attacks against medical facilities and personnel,” Pinheiro added.

Most alarmingly, the Commission has received multiple reports - which it is now investigating - that bombs allegedly containing weaponised chlorine have been used in the town of Saraqeb in Idlib and in Douma in eastern Ghouta.

Mounting attacks in Idlib come at a time when the escalation of violence in eastern Ghouta has also magnified the longstanding humanitarian crisis in that besieged pocket on the northeastern outskirts of Damascus. Airstrikes and shelling of areas held by anti-government armed groups has compounded a three year siege in which nearly 400,000 civilians – including children -- have had little access to basic assistance, including food, medicines and life-saving health assistance.

“What is happening in eastern Ghouta is not simply a humanitarian crisis because aid is denied, these sieges involve the international crimes of indiscriminate bombardment and deliberate starvation of the civilian population,” stated Pinheiro. “It is time for all warring parties to make the lives of civilians their paramount concern,” Pinheiro concluded. “This requires unimpeded humanitarian access to the civilian population and an end to indiscriminate bombardment.”

The Commission calls on all parties to abide by the basic principles of international humanitarian law and to take every necessary precaution to protect civilians. It supports all efforts to promote accountability and find a political solution to the conflict. The Commission remains committed to fulfilling its mandate to investigate and document all human rights violations occurring in the context of the Syrian armed conflict, regardless of who commits them.

Background

The Commission of Inquiry on Syria was established by the Human Rights Council in August 2011 to investigate and record all violations of international human rights law and allegations of crimes against humanity and war crimes. The Commission is also tasked to identify, where possible, those responsible for these violations with a view to ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable.

The Commission comprises of Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (Chair), Ms. Karen Koning AbuZayd, and Mr. Hanny Megally.

The Commission of Inquiry on Syria will present an oral update to the Human Rights Council in Geneva during an interactive dialogue at its 37th session in March.

Additional information about the Commission of Inquiry and links to all available reports can be found on their website:

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

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[Back](#)

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