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World Report 2016 - Syria

In 2015, violence continued to escalate inside Syria amid an absence of meaningful efforts to end the war or reduce abuses. The government and its allies carried out deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians. Incommunicado detention and torture remain rampant in detention facilities. Non-state armed groups opposing the government also carried out serious abuses including attacking civilians, using child soldiers, kidnapping, and torture.

The armed extremist group Islamic State (also known as ISIS), and Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, were responsible for systematic and widespread violations, including targeting civilians, kidnappings, and executions.

According to local Syrian groups, as of October 2015, the death toll in the conflict reached more than 250,000 people including over 100,000 civilians. According to local groups, more than 640,000 people live under long-term siege in Syria. The conflict has led to a humanitarian crisis with an estimated 7.6 million internally displaced and 4.2 million refugees in neighboring countries.

Government Attacks on Civilians, Indiscriminate Use of Weapons

The government persisted in conducting indiscriminate air attacks, including dropping large numbers of improvised barrel bombs on civilians in defiance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139 passed on February 22, 2014. These unguided high explosive bombs are cheaply made, locally produced, and typically constructed from large oil drums, gas cylinders, and water tanks, filled with high explosives and scrap metal to enhance fragmentation, and then dropped from helicopters.

Between February 2014 and January 2015, Human Rights Watch determined at least 450 major damage sites that showed damage consistent with barrel bomb detonations. One local group estimated that by February 22, 2015 aerial barrel bomb attacks had killed 6,163 civilians in Syria, including 1,892 children, since the passage of the UN Security Council Resolution 2139.

Airstrikes have indiscriminately hit markets, schools, and hospitals. One of the deadliest air attacks occurred on August 16 when government's air force repeatedly struck Douma's popular markets and residential areas killing at least 112 people.

Despite its accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2014, the Syrian government used toxic chemicals in several barrel bomb attacks in Idlib governorate in March, April, and May. While Human Rights Watch was unable to conclusively determine the toxic chemicals used, the distinct smell of chlorine reported by rescue workers and doctors indicate that it was probably used. In August, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2235 to establish an independent panel charged with determining who is responsible for chemical attacks in Syria.

The Syrian government also continues to impose sieges, which are estimated by the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to affect over 200,000 civilians. The sieges violate council Resolution 2139, which demands that all parties "immediately lift the sieges of populated areas," including in Homs, Moadamiya, and Daraya in western Ghouta, eastern Ghouta, and the Palestinian refugee camp in Yarmouk in south Damascus. The government has used siege strategies to effectively starve civilian populations into submission and force negotiations that would allow the government to retake territory.

Arbitrary Arrests, Enforced Disappearances, Torture, Deaths in Custody by Government Forces

Syrian security forces continue to detain people arbitrarily, regularly subjecting them to ill-treatment and torture, and often disappearing them using an extensive network of detention facilities throughout Syria. Many detainees were young men in their 20s or 30s; but children, women, and elderly people were also detained. In some instances, individuals reported that security forces detained their family members, including children, to pressure them to turn themselves in.

Despite a general amnesty declared by the government in June 2014, scores of civil society activists, human rights defenders, media, and humanitarian workers remain in arbitrary detention, some of whom are on trial, including before counterterrorism courts, for exercising their rights. Human rights defender Mazen Darwish, and his colleagues Hani al-Zitani and Hussein Ghareer, from the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, were finally released in the summer of 2015.

Activists who remained in detention at time of writing included freedom of expression advocate Bassil Khartabil. Some activists, like the lawyer and human rights defender Khalil Maatouk, whom former detainees reported to have seen in government detention, continued to be held in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance.

Released detainees consistently report ill-treatment and torture in detention facilities, and prison conditions that lead to many cases of deaths in custody. Former detainees, including detained doctors, said that common causes of death in detention include infections, torture, and lack of care for chronic diseases. At least 890 detainees died in custody in 2015, according to local activists.

Security Council Resolution 2139 demands an end to arbitrary detention, disappearance, and abductions, and the release of everyone who has been arbitrarily detained.

Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS Abuses

Extremist Islamist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS committed systematic rights abuses, including intentionally targeting and abducting civilians.

On March 31, ISIS deliberately killed at least 35 civilians after they briefly seized the village of Mab`oujeh in Hama countryside, according to local residents. ISIS also deliberately targeted civilians in a June 2015 attack on the northern Syrian city of Kobani (Ain al-Arab in Arabic) killing between 233 and 262 civilians. According to witnesses, the attackers killed civilians using automatic weapons including machineguns and rifles. They also used grenades and snipers fired on civilians from rooftops as they tried to retrieve the dead.

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that they saw ISIS execute people in public places in towns the group controlled in the governorates of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor. The victims were shot, beheaded, crucified, or stoned to death depending on the charge. Some people were executed for blasphemy, adultery, or treason, the witnesses reported.

ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have imposed strict and discriminatory rules on women and girls and they have both actively recruited child soldiers. ISIS continued to sexually enslave and abuse Yezidi women and girls, many of whom are in places under their control, such as Raqqa in Syria.

By September, over 2,000 Yezidi women and girls had escaped, but over 5,200 remained in the hands of ISIS, according to Vian Dakhil, a Yezidi member of Iraq's parliament. Human Rights Watch documented a system of organized rape and sexual assault, sexual slavery, and forced marriage by ISIS forces. Yezidi women and girls told Human Rights Watch how ISIS members forced them into marriage; sold, in some cases a number of times; or given as "gifts" to ISIS fighters.

ISIS also executed men accused of homosexuality. International media has reported the execution of men charged with being gay in ISIS controlled areas by throwing them off the top of buildings. According to the gay activist organization OutRight Action International, 36 men in Syria and Iraq were killed on charges of sodomy.

Abuses by Other Non-State Armed Groups

Non-state armed groups have launched indiscriminate mortar and other artillery strikes from areas under their control that killed civilians in neighborhoods under government control in Aleppo, Damascus, Idlib, and Latakia. These attacks repeatedly hit known civilian objectives, including schools, mosques, and markets.

Armed groups continue to impose sieges around the towns of Nubul and Zahra (Aleppo) and Fou'a and Kefraya (Idlib).

Non-state armed groups including the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front also used children for combat and other military purposes. They also put students at risk by using schools at military bases, barracks, detention centers, and sniper posts.

Non-state armed groups have also been responsible for abductions. At least 54 Alawite women and children that were taken hostage during a military offensive in Latakia countryside in August 2013 continue to be held by "the Mujahadeen room in Latakia countryside."

On November 10, 2015 armed opposition groups shelled Latakia killing 23 people and injuring 65 according to international media reports. The Syrian state news agency said that the shells were fired by Al-Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and another armed opposition group, Ahrar al-Sham. The attacks happened close to Tishrin University. The Russian air force has been using a military air base south of Latakia to carry out strikes in Syria.

Armed groups also endangered detained civilians and soldiers in Eastern Ghouta by placing them in metal cages in what they said was an attempt to deter government attacks on the area. Such a practice constitutes hostage-taking and an outrage against their personal dignity, which are both war crimes

Prominent human rights defender, Razan Zeitouneh, and three of her colleagues, Wael Hamada, Samira Khalil, and Nazem Hammadi were abducted on December 9, 2013, in Douma, a city outside Damascus under the control of a number of armed opposition groups, including the Army of Islam. Their fate remained unknown at time of writing.

Areas under Kurdish Rule

In January 2014, the Democratic Union Party and allied parties established a transitional administration in the three northern regions: Afrin, Ain al-Arab (Kobani), and Jazira, which they have declared the Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava. They have formed councils akin to ministries and introduced a new constitutional law. Authorities there have committed arbitrary arrests, due process violations, and failed to address unsolved killings and disappearances.

The Kurdish armed forces known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) is still not meeting its commitment to demobilize child soldiers and to stop using boys and girls under the age of 18 in combat. In June 2015, the YPG wrote a letter to Human Rights Watch saying that it was facing "significant challenges" to stop its use of child soldiers due to the armed conflict but that it had demobilized 27 boys and 16 girls. Concerns remain over the creation of a YPG "non-combatant category" for children aged 16 and 17 where the group will continue to recruit children but not have them perform military duties.

Human Rights Watch received numerous, detailed complaints from Syrian refugees and activists in southern Turkey that YPG troops forcibly displaced a number of Sunni Arabs from areas that the YPG had taken back from ISIS, as well as confiscating or burning their homes, businesses, and crops. Syrian Kurdish authorities have denied any policy of forced displacement or other targeting of Arabs.

Displacement Crisis

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimated in 2015 that 7.6 million Syrians are internally displaced and that 12.2 million need humanitarian assistance.

In 2015, humanitarian aid agencies experienced significant challenges in getting assistance to the displaced civilian population and others badly affected by the conflict because of sieges imposed by both government and non-state armed groups, the government's continuing obstacles to allow assistance to come in across the border, and a general failure to guarantee security for humanitarian workers.

In October 2015, UN OCHA estimated that 393,700 live in areas under siege in Syria. As of February 2015, the UN secretary-general named 11 besieged areas in Syria. The Syrian American Medical Society identified 38 additional communities that meet the definition of besieged bringing their total of besieged to 640,000. These

besieged areas suffer from constant bombardment, deprivation of adequate aid in forms of nutrition and clean water, and their residents receive poor medical attention.

In July 2014, a Security Council Resolution authorized deliveries of cross border humanitarian aid even without government permission.

As of November had registered over 4.2 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. In 2015, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon all implemented measures to restrict the numbers of refugees entering their countries.

All four neighboring countries accepting Syrian refugees have denied Syrians secure legal status.

Palestinians from Syria have faced additional obstacles. They have been refused entry or forcibly deported from Jordan and some Palestinian-Jordanians who had been living in Syria had their Jordanian citizenship withdrawn. Palestinian refugees coming from Syria have also faced additional restrictions in Lebanon following new regulations by the minister of interior in May that limited Palestinians' ability to enter the country or renew their residencies if they already were in the country.

In 2015, more than 440,000 Syrians attempted to reach Europe by sea. While some European Union countries offered them safety, as the year progressed, and particularly in the aftermath of the November 13 Paris attacks, barriers were increasingly erected to prevent entry of all migrants, including Syrians. Hungary erected fences and imposed high penalties for irregular entry, while pushbacks were reported from Bulgaria and Greece, sometimes violently, at their borders or from their territorial waters without allowing people to lodge asylum claims.

Countries that do not neighbor Syria, including in the West, continued to accept only small numbers of refugees for resettlement, though a few, such as Canada and most notably France, reiterated their commitments in the wake of the Paris attacks

At time of writing, only 45 percent of UNHCR's appeal for the regional refugee response was funded, leaving a budget shortfall of more than US\$2.5 billion. As a result, UNHCR, the World Food Programme, and others have cut assistance to refugees, including the provision of basic goods and health care subsidies.

Key International Actors

Efforts to push the UN Security Council to take more meaningful action in Syria failed. The French sought to pass a resolution banning barrel bombs and introducing a more robust reporting mechanism but their efforts stalled amid Russian opposition and a preference among a number of countries to prioritize negotiations.

Key regional and international actors in Syria, but not Syrian parties themselves, met in Vienna in October in an attempt to restart political negotiations. While the meetings did not result in any tangible outcomes regarding the protection of civilians, the parties agreed to launch direct negotiations between the warring parties in early 2016.

The Syrian government continued to violate Security Council Resolution 2139 from February 2014 demanding safe and unhindered humanitarian access—including across conflict lines and across borders; that all parties cease "indiscriminate employment of weapons in populated areas, including shelling and aerial bombardment, such as the use of barrel bombs," and an end to the practices of arbitrary detention, disappearance, and abductions, and the release of everyone who has been arbitrarily detained.

In addition to persistently blocking Security Council action to curb violations by the Syrian government, Russia, along with the Iranian government, continued to provide the Syrian government with military assistance in 2015, according to international media reports.

The Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of its independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria in March 2015 for one year.

Russian forces began a joint air operation with the Syrian government at the beginning of October claiming it was targeting only ISIS locations but in fact were also striking other armed group in areas like Idlib and Homs. Human Rights Watch recorded a number of civilian casualties where people said they were victims of Russian airstrikes.

The United States continued leading coalition to bombard ISIS in Iraq and Syria. France promised to increase its airstrikes in ISIS controlled areas after the armed extremist group claimed a series of attacks in Paris in November. The United Kingdom and Germany also voted to begin airstrikes against ISIS in early December.

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