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OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Syria: Bachelet raises alarm at plight of civilians in Daraa amid ongoing hostilities

GENEVA (5 August 2021) – UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on Thursday sounded the alarm at the plight of civilians in and around the southern Syrian city of Daraa, where neighbourhoods are seeing intense fighting and indiscriminate shelling by Government forces and armed opposition groups, with the only route out strictly controlled by the Syrian Government.

“The stark picture emerging from Daraa al-Balad and other neighbourhoods underscores how much at risk civilians there are, repeatedly exposed to fighting and violence, and in effect under siege. They are facing checkpoints, restrictions on their movements, tanks on the streets and their property is being seized and stolen,” said Bachelet.

Hostilities between Government forces and armed groups escalated at the end of July, with shelling and artillery strikes hitting residential areas. It followed weeks of growing tension, during which the Government imposed tighter controls on roads in and out of the neighbourhood of Daraa al-Balad, a former opposition stronghold, and other areas to pressure some members of armed groups to surrender, hand over their weapons and relocate to northern Syria.

Government forces have strengthened their military positions in Daraa al-Balad and stationed tanks in residential areas. In recent days, they have only been allowing pedestrians out of Daraa al-Balad along the al-Saraya road, subjecting people to strict security checks.

Members of armed opposition groups have launched counter-attacks on several areas in rural Daraa Governorate, reportedly capturing dozens of Government soldiers.

It is the most serious confrontation since 2018 when Government forces established control over Daraa following various Russian-brokered reconciliation deals.

As violence flared last week, the UN Human Rights Office documented that at least eight civilians were killed by reported ground-based strikes by both Syrian Government forces and armed groups. Among those killed were five members of a family whose home was hit in the town of al-Yaduda in western rural Daraa.

At least one mortar shell launched by unidentified armed individuals hit and damaged the Daraa National Hospital in Daraa al-Mahatta.

Among other incidents confirmed by the UN Human Rights Office, Government forces seized and occupied several private homes in the areas of Shamal al-Khat, al-Panorama and al-Sabeel in Daraa al-Mahatta, expelling the occupants and not allowing them to take any of their belongings. These forces also stole money, mobile phones and laptops during searches of at least nine private houses on 30 and 31 July in Daraa al-Mahatta.

The escalation in hostilities has forced at least 18,000 civilians to flee Daraa al-Balad since 28 July, many of them to Daraa city itself and nearby areas. These include several hundred people sheltering in schools in Daraa al-Mahatta.

“I remind the parties to the conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law, in particular as regards the protection of civilians, and under international human rights law. Tanks in residential areas and a checkpoint set up in a house strongly suggest the necessary precautions are not being taken,” the UN Human Rights Chief stressed.

“There needs to be an immediate ceasefire to alleviate the suffering of civilians in Daraa. I also call on the parties to the conflict to allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded access for humanitarian relief,” she added.

In a further indication of how tense and dangerous the security situation is across Daraa Governorate, as scores are settled and control of areas shifts, the UN Human Rights Office continues to document targeted killings. The victims include at least 101 civilians killed since January up to 31 July. The vast majority were killed in drive-by shootings and by unidentified perpetrators.

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