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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

**Oral Update of the independent
international commission of inquiry on
the Syrian Arab Republic**

I. Introduction

1. The harrowing violence in the Syrian Arab Republic has entered its fourth year, with no signs of abating. The lives of over one hundred thousand people have been extinguished. Thousands have been the victims of torture. The indiscriminate and disproportionate shelling and aerial bombardment of civilian-inhabited areas has intensified in the last six months, as has the use of suicide and car bombs. Civilians in besieged areas have been reduced to scavenging. In this conflict's most recent low, people, including young children, have starved to death.
2. Save for the efforts of humanitarian agencies operating inside Syria and along its borders, the international community has done little but bear witness to the plight of those caught in the maelstrom. Syrians feel abandoned and hopeless. The overwhelming imperative is for the parties, influential states and the international community to work to ensure the protection of civilians. In particular, as set out in Security Council resolution 2139, parties must lift the sieges and allow unimpeded and safe humanitarian access.
3. Compassion does not and should not suffice. A negotiated political solution, which the commission has consistently held to be the only solution to this conflict, must be pursued with renewed vigour both by the parties and by influential states. Among victims, the need for accountability is deeply-rooted in the desire for peace. The international community has the obligation to demonstrate that impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity will not be tolerated.
4. This update covers only the most egregious violations committed during the period of 20 January to 10 March 2014 and complements the presentation of the commission's most recent report (A/HRC/25/65) to the Human Rights Council, which covered the period of 15 July 2013 to 20 January 2014. It is based on 130 interviews conducted in the region and from Geneva as well as satellite images, photographs, video recordings and other documentary material. Investigations into allegations of massacres are ongoing.
5. The commission's investigations remain curtailed by the denial of access to the Syrian Arab Republic.

II. Violations in the treatment of civilians and hors de combat fighters

A. Unlawful Killings

Non-State armed groups

6. In January 2014, hostilities between non-State armed groups escalated throughout northern and northeastern governorates. Clashes threatened ISIS strongholds and in several incidents, armed group coalitions, including the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionary Front in Idlib and the Mujahideen Army in Aleppo city and northern countryside, took over ISIS bases. In the days and hours prior to attack, ISIS fighters conducted mass executions of detainees, thereby perpetrating war crimes. The number killed as well as allegations of mass graves connected to these executions remain under investigation.

7. On 4 January 2014, the FSA led an assault on ISIS-controlled areas near Deir Hassan and Al Dana, Idlib. During the attack, ISIS executed detainees held at their base in Haqrim, 20 km west of Al Dana.

8. The National Hospital complex in Qadi Askar, Aleppo has been occupied by ISIS, the Al Tawheed Brigade and the Sharia Council. ISIS used the Children's Hospital building as their headquarters and as a detention facility. Detainees held in this makeshift prison stated that on 6 January 2014, a prison guard began summoning certain prisoners out of their cells. Subsequently, armed groups from Salah Ad Din discovered an "execution field" between the Children's Hospital and Mashfa Al Oyouun, the Ophthalmology Hospital. Those who escaped in the course of hostilities were able to identify co-detainees among the dead.

9. In early January 2014, ISIS gained control of Jabhat Al Nusra bases in Tabaqa, Al Raqqah, including a prison administered by the Aws El Qurany Battalion. Several weeks later, the bodies of four men, who had been detained in the prison, were found in Assad Lake near the Al Forat Dam.

10. Following armed hostilities between ISIS and other non-State armed groups in Tel Abyad on 11 January, ISIS executed captured Jabhat Al Nusra and Ahrar Al Sham fighters. Witnesses who saw the dead bodies described that most had their hands tied behind their backs with strips of cloth and a single shot to the head.

11. The collected information indicates that anticipating a military loss, ISIS fighters selected detainees and killed them at their place of detention or took them to a nearby execution site. Many killings occurred hastily, at point blank range. In several incidents, photographic evidence indicates that no burials were carried out.

12. The identities of the victims of the executions carried out by ISIS in Idlib, Aleppo and Al Raqqah continue to be investigated. Existing information indicates that some victims were civilians, while others were captured fighters. It is clear that all victims of these executions were persons taking no active part in hostilities at the time. Such acts amount to violations of international humanitarian law and the war crime of murder.

B. Torture and other forms of ill-treatment

Government forces and pro-Government militia

13. Accounts from released detainees indicate that severe torture continues to be used in Government detention facilities. The conditions of detention alone rise to the level of ill-treatment. In a Military Intelligence branch in Damascus, detainees were harshly beaten, hung from the ceiling and walls, beaten with electric cables and subjected to psychological torture. One female detainee was locked in a room with dead bodies for three days.

14. Conditions in Aleppo Central Prison continued to deteriorate in January, resulting in the deaths of detainees from starvation and infectious diseases caused by a systematic denial of food, electricity, sanitation and medical care by the prison authorities.

15. Previously documented methods of torture appear to be confirmed by photographic evidence obtained. Recent imagery supports consistent findings that detainees in Government detention facilities are not accorded adequate food, leading to malnourishment and in some cases, starvation.

16. In January, reports of death in detention surfaced in the form of photographs of deceased persons with severe injuries resulting from

torture, as well as signs of starvation. These allegations are being investigated as further evidence of maltreatment and deaths in Government detention facilities.

17. Ill-treatment and physical violence continues to be used by Government and pro-Government forces controlling checkpoints. In January, “Shabbiha” militia ill-treated a man at the Sahasaha checkpoint in Damascus.

18. As previously determined, torture, cruel, inhumane, degrading treatment or punishment have been perpetrated by Government forces as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population pursuant to or in furtherance of a State policy, amounting to a crime against humanity.

19. Physical and psychological violence continues to be employed to punish, humiliate and interrogate persons, amounting to a violation of international human rights and humanitarian law, incurring individual criminal responsibility.

Non-State armed groups

20. In January, captured fighters detained in ISIS facilities were subjected to severe ill-treatment and physical violence, demonstrating the continuing and systematic use of torture.

21. A man accused of being a FSA fighter was detained by ISIS in January in a former school in Tadif, 1 km south of Al-Bab, Aleppo. He described being “crucified,” tied by his hands and feet to a wooden cross with his feet above the ground, lashed and beaten. Fighters from Jabal Al-Zawiya, Idlib, captured by ISIS in January, were detained and tortured by electrocution and lashing with cables. Ahrar Al Sham fighters captured by ISIS in Al Raqqa during an assault on a checkpoint, were detained and tortured, subjected to lashings and threatened with death.

22. In Afrin, Aleppo, the Popular Protection Units (YPG) apprehended persons perceived to be political opponents of the Democratic Union Party – Syria (PYD) and subjected them to ill-treatment and torture in a detention facility referred to as ‘the court building.’ Detainees released in January bore injuries consistent with severe beatings.

23. Non-State armed groups continued to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering on hors de combat persons, rising to the level of torture.

C. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Government forces and pro-Government militia

24. Sexual violence against women and men in Government detention continues. Multiple cases of sexual assault against women in detention were reported in detention centres in Damascus. In a Military Intelligence branch in Damascus, women were forced to strip and male officers performed intimate body searches. A woman was physically and psychologically tortured and threatened with sexual violence and electrocution by prison officers in the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Mezzeh Airport.

25. In Adra Central Prison, Damascus, pregnant detainees are suffering miscarriages, premature births and deaths of new-borns as a result of insanitary conditions and denial of medical treatment. There is a climate of impunity and women have been punished after making complaints.

26. Female family members of opposition fighters continue to be targeted by Government forces. In late 2013, Government forces invaded Wadi el-Mawla near Talkalakh, Homs looking for named men. Later, they returned to the family homes of the men and killed their wives and children. A large number of women from El Ghouta, Damascus have been detained in Mezzeh Prison on the suspicion of male family members' links to opposition fighters.

27. Cases of gay men detained and tortured on the grounds of their sexual orientation were documented. In Damascus, two gay men were taken from an army checkpoint to a police station where they were insulted, beaten violently and whipped with a leather strap.

Non-State armed groups

28. Non-state armed groups have targeted female family members of Government forces. In December 2013, two sisters aged 63 and 64 years were kidnapped by Jabhat Al-Nusra, ISIS and Al-Islam Brigade fighters in Adra, Damascus on the grounds that their family members worked for the Syrian army.

29. The estimated 200 women and children abducted during the non-State armed group offensive on villages in Al Hiffa, Latakia on 4-5 August 2013 continue to be held as hostages. The fate of the 60 women captured by Jamaat Al-Husba outside Nubul and Zahra, Aleppo on 23 and 24 September 2013 remains unknown.

30. Cases of rape and torture of gay men by non-State armed groups were documented in Eastern Ghouta and Barza, Damascus governorate.

D. Violations of Children's Rights

31. The impact of the Syrian war falls heavily on its youngest victims. The testimony of mothers and children themselves demonstrates the psychological trauma that has resulted from witnessing violent events, including the death of relatives and friends. Children are displaying signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as insomnia and aggression. Several have expressed thinking about committing suicide. Many are fearful of loud noises and planes and some have begun to wet their beds.

Government forces and pro-Government militia

32. Up to a million children are estimated to be living under siege or in areas without humanitarian assistance in Syria. Civilians evacuated from Yarmouk camp in Damascus reported that the majority of children were malnourished and several had starved to death in December 2013.

33. Boys and girls under the age of 18 continue to be imprisoned with adults and subject to inhuman conditions of detention. In the Air Force Intelligence Branch in Mezzeh Airport, Damascus, boys and girls between 4 and 10 years old are held with their mothers and denied medical care.

34. Children have been killed in unlawful attacks, including shelling, aerial bombardment and by snipers. During these attacks, children have witnessed the death of their friends and destruction of their schools. In late December 2013, a six year old boy in Al Jeezah, Dara'a was injured by shrapnel when his school was shelled. Such attacks severely curtail children's access to education.

Non-State armed groups

35. Armed groups, including ISIS, Jabhat Al-Nusra and FSA-affiliated groups have continued to use children in hostilities. Fighters under the age

of 18 years were observed in the attack on Adra in December 2013. Armed 16 and 17 year olds were observed at ISIS and FSA checkpoints in eastern Aleppo governorate in February.

36. In Al-Raqqah governorate, ISIS has used children to inform on supporters and opponents of ISIS within the civilian population under its control. The use of children in such functions endangers their welfare and interferes with children's rights.

37. Despite orders issued to YPG commanders in December 2013 not to recruit children below the age of 18 years, the presence of armed boys and girls aged 14 to 17 years, was documented at YPG checkpoints in Qamishli and Al Malikiyah in Al Hasakah as well as in Afrin, Aleppo.

38. Children living under siege in Afrin have been affected by shortages of food and medical supplies. In one instance, an infant injured in a shelling attack died as the hospital did not have the medical and surgical supplies to treat him.

39. Former detainees released in January from ISIS detention in Idlib and Aleppo describe young boys – including one in Aleppo as young as 9 years –old – detained together with male adults in inhumane conditions. Several boys had been abducted for ransom or as a reprisal for acts by their older male relatives.

40. Children have also been the victims of unlawful attacks by armed groups. On 9 January, 14 school children who had just completed their exams were killed outside their school by an ISIS suicide car bomb in Al-Kafat, Hama. Non-State armed groups have occupied schools, halting education and endangering children.

III. Violations concerning the conduct of hostilities

A. Unlawful Attacks

41. Unlawful attacks, a primary reason for civilian casualties and mass displacement, have intensified in recent months.

Government forces and pro-government militia

42. Since 20 January 2014, the Government has ramped up its campaign of dropping barrel bombs into residential neighbourhoods of Aleppo city, with devastating consequences for civilians. Local hospitals detailed the surging number of patients wounded in such bombardments. This surge in bombardments has led to large-scale displacement from targeted areas. Refugees detailed how they fled after their houses were destroyed and to escape the unceasing bombardments.

43. Government helicopters hovering at high altitudes have dropped scores of barrel bombs, improvised explosive devices, on the neighbourhoods of Al-Haydariyah, Maskin Hananu, Sha'ar, Al-Sakhour, Tariq Al-Bab, Al-Myassar, Al-Marjeh and Al-Sukkari. In many incidents there was no clear military target in the proximity of the area attacked.

44. In some instances, multiple barrel bombs have been dropped in the same area. In one incident in Sha'ar neighbourhood in early February, the first bomb caused a building to collapse with people inside. The second bomb killed and injured many of those who had been attempting to remove people from the rubble.

45. Barrel bombs have caused extensive civilian casualties. Civilians have been killed from the initial blasts and the shrapnel that results. Others have been killed in the collapse of buildings around the impact site. Bodies were torn apart by shrapnel and flying debris. Survivors commonly spoke about seeing bodies without limbs or heads. In one attack on a market in Al-Myassar neighbourhood on 30 January, a survivor indicated that while he believed 27 people had been killed, it was difficult to be certain as the bodies were so mangled. Many survivors have lost limbs or suffered severe injuries. Field hospitals, lacking supplies, have struggled to treat victims. Rescue workers have been forced to leave an unknown number of victims buried in the rubble due to the lack of equipment and the frequency of the attacks.

46. A large number of children have been killed or maimed in the recent barrel bomb attacks on Aleppo city. In a barrel bomb attack on Al-Sukkari neighbourhood on 7 February 2014, a two-year old child was killed following the collapse of a multi-storey building.

47. In January 2014, Government helicopters dropped barrel bombs in continued attacks on other towns in Aleppo governorate, including Hreitan and Al-Bab.

48. Barrel bombs, particularly when dropped from high altitudes, cannot be precisely targeted. Their use, in this manner, is indiscriminate. In areas where armed group fighters were present, Government forces treated clearly separate and distinct military objectives located in densely populated areas with high concentrations of civilians, as a single military objective. The use of barrel bombs in this context amounts to 'area bombardment', prohibited under international humanitarian law. Such bombardments spread terror among the civilian population.

49. The attacks were repetitive and systematic, using highly inaccurate munitions in areas where a massive loss of civilian life was foreseeable and inevitable. In a number of instances, there was no evident military objective in the area targeted, indicating that the object of attack was the civilian population residing in these areas.

50. As the Government continues its offensive, notably in Damascus, Dara'a and Aleppo governorates, it has shelled civilian areas with artillery, mortars and tank fire. Aerial bombardment by helicopters and jet fighters has been consistently observed.

51. During its attack on Yabroud and Al-Sehel in the Damascene countryside in January and February, Government planes and helicopter bombarded the towns. Army positions located 1km away from Al-Sehel directed mortars and tank-fire into the village, resulting in civilian casualties. In Yabroud, Government shelling has hit civilian houses as well as a school then functioning as a shelter for internally displaced people who had fled shelling in other areas. There were no military targets in the area where the attacks occurred. The attacks on these towns have resulted in mass displacement, including the repeated displacement of IDPs.

52. On 17 January 2014, Government forces shelled Al-Madeira mosque in Eastern Ghouta, Damascus countryside, as people were leaving the Friday prayers. Over a dozen civilians were killed immediately. Several more later died in hospital as a result of their injuries. Scores were injured. There were no military targets in or around the mosque.

53. Towns and villages in the western Dara'a countryside, including Garyiah West and Al-Taebah, were shelled by the army between December 2013 and February 2014. Maskin Hananu neighbourhood in Aleppo city was bombarded by MiG jets in late January 2014. In all

instances, these attacks caused significant civilian casualties, including a large number of children.

54. In launching these attacks. Government forces made no effort to distinguish civilians from military targets. Such indiscriminate attacks stand a violation of international law.

Non-State armed groups

55. Armed groups have shelled towns and villages in Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Al-Hasakah governorates. There has been an increased use of car bombs, some of which targeted wholly civilian areas.

56. Armed groups have continued to shell Nubul and Zahra, Aleppo using artillery and home-made rockets. The Kurdish enclave of Afrin, currently besieged by armed groups, has come under sustained shelling from positions close to Azaz. The siege has exacerbated civilian casualties as it has rendered hospitals unable to treat those with otherwise non-life threatening injuries.

57. In January 2014, armed groups based in Al Mlihah, Beit Saham and Ein Tarma in eastern Damascus countryside launched home-made rockets and artillery shells into Jaramana neighbourhood, causing civilian deaths. In renewed attacks ongoing since January 2014, armed groups, notably Jabhat Al-Nusra, have shelled Sednaya from the areas of Rankous and Talfita.

58. Villages in Hama governorate have been shelled from surrounding villages where armed groups are based. Al-Rabia in western Hama has been shelled by Al Fatihin Brigade. Taldara, a village in eastern Hama, was shelled by unidentified armed groups. In Al-Hasakah, Kurdish civilian populations in Qamishli, Ras Al-Ayn and Al-Malikiyah continue to be shelled.

59. Non-State armed groups used mortars, artillery shells and home-made rockets in a manner that made no distinction between civilian and military objectives, thereby committing unlawful attacks.

60. While instances were recorded of armed fighters positioned on the outskirts of towns away from civilian populations, most fighters, including those in Aleppo city, were based among civilians, exposing them to attack and violating international legal obligations that require parties to avoid positioning military objectives within or near densely populated areas.

61. Non-State armed groups have increasingly resorted to suicide bombings and the use of improvised explosive devices. On 9 January, 14 school children were killed outside their school by an ISIS suicide car bomb in Al-Kafat, Hama. On 11 March, three ISIS fighters, wearing explosive vests, detonated themselves at a municipality office in Qamishli city, Al-Hasakah. Five people were killed and eight wounded. There were no military targets in the area. This is a war crime. Its primary purpose of the attacks by ISIS was to spread terror among civilians, a violation of international humanitarian law.

Unknown perpetrators

62. Since 20 January 2014, there have been several car bombings for which responsibility could not be determined.

63. On 14 February, a car bomb exploded outside a mosque in Yadouda, as worshippers were leaving after Friday prayers. Thirty-two people were killed.

64. On 6 March, at least 15 people were killed in a car bomb explosion in an area of Homs city populated by the Armenian and Christian community.

65. There were no military targets in the vicinity of these two bombings. These attacks were designed to target civilians, a war crime. Such attacks, the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among civilians, are prohibited under international humanitarian law.

B. Specifically protected persons and objects

i. Hospitals, ambulances and medical personnel

Government forces and pro-Government militia

66. Attacks on hospitals by Government forces were documented in Idlib and Damascus governorates. Between 25 and 30 January 2014, the Government fired a missile hitting the emergency ward hospital in Saraqib. One doctor was killed by shrapnel. On 23 February, a car bomb targeted the Orient Medical Clinic in the opposition-controlled town of Atmeh, near the Turkish border. At least nine people were killed. During the Government's offensive on Yabroud, Damascus countryside, in early February, a hospital in which IDPs were seeking shelter, was shelled. Three people were killed and seven injured.

67. Government forces have prevented wounded civilians from accessing medical treatment. In early December, following the Government shelling of Al-Sehel, Damascus, Government forces refused to evacuate an injured girl to a hospital. She later died of her injuries.

68. Those who have been wounded remain fearful of arrest by security services while being treated in Government hospitals. In January 2014, a boy was discharged by his parents after security services accused him of being a terrorist and took his photograph.

69. In attacks on hospitals, medical units and health-care personnel, the Government violated binding international humanitarian law to care for the sick and wounded and committed the war crime of attacking protected objects.

Non-State armed groups

70. In January 2014, during confrontations between Government forces and non-State armed groups, as-yet-unidentified groups attacked a hospital in Jasem, Dara'a governorate.

71. ISIS has been named as obstructing medical care in locations in Aleppo, Al-Raqqa, Idlib and Latakia. This obstruction has extended to holding medical staff hostage and to commandeering ambulances for use in their own field hospitals.

72. During the clashes between ISIS and other armed groups in Aleppo governorate in January and February 2014, reports were received of ISIS preventing others taking wounded Liwa Al-Tawheed fighter to receive medical treatment.

73. In its attacks on hospitals, medical units and health-care personnel, armed groups have violated international humanitarian law and committed the war crime of attacking protected objects.

Unknown perpetrators

74. On 12 March, a Palestinian pharmacist who works for the Palestinian Red Crescent in Yarmouk Camp, Damascus was shot dead on exiting the

hospital there. Investigations are continuing to establish the perpetrator of this attack.

ii. Religious personnel and cultural objects

75. Syria's historic sites are being used for military purposes by all warring parties. There has been widespread looting and damage at many of the ancient sites. As stated in the joint statement of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, the UNESCO Director Irina Bokova and United Nations and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, "the destruction of such precious heritage gravely affects the identity and history of the Syrian people and all humanity, damaging the foundations of society for many years to come".

Government forces and pro-Government militia

76. Government forces placed military objectives in and around objects of great cultural significance, including those around Palmyra (Homs) and the Aleppo citadel. This is in breach of its obligations to respect and protect cultural property under the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

Non-State armed groups

77. Non-State armed groups are based and conducting military operations in the historic Qalaat Al-Husn, Homs. It is being used as a launching pad for attacks on surrounding Government checkpoints.

78. In Al-Raqqah governorate ISIS continues to destroy icons in churches, including in the historic Church of Martyrs. In Damascus, the Sherobem Monastery was shelled in January by unidentified armed groups.

79. On 10 March 2014, 13 nuns who had been removed from Yabroud on 2 December 2013 were released in a prisoner exchange for 141 women and children held by the Government. Investigations continue as to the circumstances of detention of the nuns as well as the woman and children. The fate and whereabouts of Father Dall'Oglio, seized in Al-Raqqah on 28 July, and of the Syriac Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Archbishops, Yohanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi, abducted in Aleppo in April 2013, remain unknown.

80. Armed groups wilfully damaged and destroyed property of great significance to Syria's cultural heritage, in contravention of international humanitarian law. Attacks on religious personnel and buildings by non-State armed groups directly threaten freedom of religion.

C. Protracted sieges and blockades

Government forces and pro-Government militia

81. Humanitarian access remains limited to Moadhamiya, Damascus and Old City, Homs. During the evacuation of Old Homs City, which began on 7 February, hundreds of men aged 15 – 55 years were separated to undergo questioning and security screening. Many remain in Government custody and their fates are unknown, raising the prospect of disappearance.

82. From 18 January, UNRWA has been able to access Yarmouk Camp in Damascus and consistently distribute food parcels to Palestinian refugees. Since 28 February, however, access has been suspended due to hostilities in the area. Persons who were able to leave Yarmouk described the dire humanitarian conditions inside the camp, "there was no more food, no

money. Without gas or fuel, people started using wood, cutting down trees and stealing furniture, doors, windows from abandoned homes.” Victims of the siege consistently refer to instances of starvation, demonstrating the profound effect and fear such deaths instilled.

83. Humanitarian assistance must be impartial and conducted without any adverse distinction. Civilian inhabitants of a besieged city must be allowed to leave unhindered during a siege. The Syrian Government has failed to fulfil its core obligations under the right to life, adequate food and the right to the highest attainable standard of health, besieging areas in violation of international humanitarian law.

Non-State armed groups

84. In several localities, non-State armed groups have cut off water and electricity supplies to civilian areas as a military tactic.

85. Between 5 and 17 February 2014, armed groups, including Jabhat Al Nusra, based in Al Rastan, Hama, cut off the water supply to Tal Dura and Salamiyeh. In the context of attacks carried out in this area during the same period, the denial of water was a deliberate act targeting the Ismaili population of these areas, perceived as affiliated with the Government. The lack of water impacted the hygiene and health of residents.

86. Non-State armed groups continue to blockade access to Nubul and Zahra, leading to deteriorating humanitarian conditions. There is one remaining medical clinic serving 45,000 people in the area. The lack of medical supplies has resulted in the use of basic, and often insufficient, means to treat the sick and wounded.

87. The siege has been extended to Afrin since July, when ISIS cut supplies of water and electricity to the city. In one incident in late December 2013, ISIS detained and held hostage persons caught attempting to bring food into the city, accusing them of transferring food to YPG fighters. The YPG, in control of access to Afrin from the north, supplies food and basic necessities to the city. Information collected indicates that the distribution of food is conducted on the basis of affiliation and support for the PYD.

88. The protracted nature of these sieges, the lack of water and sanitation, electricity, humanitarian aid, medicine and food, has had a significant impact on the civilian population. The instrumentalization of such basic necessities for military ends is in violation of international humanitarian law.

D. Acts which spread terror

89. In Syria, civilians are repeatedly the victims of acts of terror committed by all parties. Acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited under international law.

Government forces and pro-Government militia

90. The Government’s campaign of barrel-bombing, notably targeting entire areas in Aleppo city, has spread terror amongst the civilian population. Barrel-bombs, particularly when dropped from high altitudes, cannot be properly targeted. Nor is it likely that anyone at the impact site would survive the initial blast. The Government does not provide early warning of attacks and there is little chance of being able to move from the area once a barrel bomb is released from a helicopter overhead.

91. Victims of barrel bombs emphasized the extreme fear and mental suffering they felt as they came under attack. Survivors and witnesses consistently described that as a result of the barrel bombing campaign, much of the civilian population lived in a state of terror.

Non-State armed groups

92. In documented incidents in Hama and Al-Hasakah, ISIS has targeted areas which by their very function are gathering-points for civilians. In Hama, ISIS exploded a car bomb outside of a school at a time when children were leaving their lessons. In Al-Hasakah, ISIS suicide bombers detonated themselves inside a Kurdish municipality office, with the intent of causing the greatest possible number of casualties.

93. These attacks had the clear purpose of terrorizing civilians. These bombings rendered people unable to function or feel safe in their daily lives. The resulting fear has prevented children from going to school. The targeting of a civil administration spreads fear across an entire city. Car and suicide bombings targeting civilian areas by non-State armed groups, notably ISIS, have as a primary purpose the spreading of terror among Syria's civilians.

IV. Conclusions

94. The harrowing violence in the Syrian Arab Republic has entered its fourth year. It shows no signs of subsiding, as is apparent from the tide of internally displaced persons and refugees fleeing violence, the persistent flow of testimony from victims of atrocities, and images of relentless destruction.

95. Civilians in besieged areas have been reduced to scavenging. In this conflict's most recent low-point, people, including young children, have starved to death.

96. The battlefield has taken on new layers of complexity. The Government continues to rely on its superior firepower, including its control of the skies. It has benefitted from the intervention of foreign fighters, many of whom have an official presence in Syria. Others, notably insurgents crossing over from Iraq, are clandestinely fighting in concert with the army and with the pro-Government militia.

97. There are now hundreds of non-State armed groups. Foreign fighters have streamed into Syria, often joining the more extremist battalions. Some, notably ISIS operating in Aleppo and Al-Raqqah governorates, are imposing their radical ideologies on the civilian population. While the armed groups are organizing themselves into coalitions, tensions over political control, resources and ideological orientations remain. In January 2014, these tensions erupted into deadly violence in northern and northeastern governorates, in the course of which persons held in detention, both civilians and hors de combat fighters were killed on "execution fields."

98. Throughout the interviews conducted by the commission during this mandate, Syrians have consistently expressed feeling abandoned and hopeless. These voices cannot go unheard. A negotiated political solution, which the commission has consistently held to be the only solution to this conflict, must be pursued with renewed vigour both by the parties and by influential states.