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AMNESTY

INTERNATIONAL

REPORT 2020/21

**THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S
HUMAN RIGHTS**



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voters of any country had said yes to this kind of mandatory due diligence.⁶

IMPUNITY

In June, the European Court of Human Rights ruled Switzerland had violated the right to life after failing to take adequate measures to protect a man who committed suicide in police custody in 2014. Swiss authorities had also neglected to conduct an effective investigation.

1. [Garantir les droits des professionnel·le·s de la santé \(in French only\)](#), (Press release, 18 August)
2. [Les lois antiterroristes sapent l'état de droit! \(in French only\)](#), (Press release, 24 September)
3. [COVID-19: Des directives claires pour l'expression de l'opinion dans les lieux publics \(in French only\)](#), (Press release, 5 May)
4. [Projet distinct de révision du droit pénal sexuel \(in French only\)](#), (Press release, 18 January)
5. [Un régime rigide dans les centres fédéraux et des délais très courts \(in French only\)](#), (Press release, 28 February)
6. [Multinationals seem too big for accountability. Switzerland may change that \(News story, 27 November\)](#)

SYRIA

Syrian Arab Republic

Head of state: **Bashar al-Assad**

Head of government: **Hussein Arnous (replaced Imad Khamis in June)**

Parties to the conflict in Syria continued to commit with impunity serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, and gross human rights abuses. Syrian and Russian government forces carried out direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, including hospitals and schools, through aerial bombing of cities in the governorates of Idlib, Hama and Aleppo, displacing close to 1 million people. Government forces continued to impede access to humanitarian aid to civilians. Security forces arbitrarily detained peaceful protesters as well as civilians who had reconciled with the government, and continued to arbitrarily detain tens of

thousands of people, including peaceful activists, humanitarian workers, lawyers and journalists, subjecting many to enforced disappearance. The self-styled Syrian National Army, supported by Turkey, subjected civilians in the northern cities of Afrin and Ras al-Ayn, which are under effective control of Turkey, to a wide range of abuses, including looting and confiscation of property, arbitrary detention and abduction. In the north-west, the armed opposition group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham arbitrarily detained and attacked media activists, journalists, medical and humanitarian workers, and others. In the north-east, the Autonomous Administration led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) arbitrarily detained individuals and continued holding tens of thousands of people suspected of affiliation to the armed group Islamic State (IS) in inhumane conditions. The Syrian government failed to adequately protect its health workers from COVID-19 and lacked a robust national response, which endangered thousands of lives. Tens of thousands of internally displaced people were at risk of contracting COVID-19 due to dire living conditions.

BACKGROUND

The conflict continued between the government and its allies, and armed opposition groups in Idlib, Hama, Aleppo and Daraa. In January, hostilities between the government, supported by Russia, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham significantly escalated in north-west Syria. By 2 March, the government had recovered control of the Damascus-Aleppo highway as well as key towns and cities in the southern Idlib governorate and in the western part of the Aleppo governorate. On 5 March, Russia and Turkey agreed to a ceasefire and to carry out joint military patrols of the Aleppo-Latakia highway (also known as the M4 highway).

Between January and April, unidentified armed groups shelled and detonated car bombs in Afrin, a city in northern Syria under the control of pro-Turkey armed groups, killing and injuring many civilians and

damaging civilian infrastructure such as homes and markets. Between March and July in Daraa governorate in the south-west, tensions escalated between armed opposition groups and government forces following clashes, shelling and targeted killings by both sides.

In April, the Board of Inquiry established in 2019 by the UN Secretary-General to investigate “incidents” that destroyed or damaged “facilities on the de-confliction list and UN-supported facilities” in north-west Syria published a summary of its findings. The Board’s conclusions included that it was “highly probable” that “the Government of Syria and/or its allies” carried out three air attacks and that a ground rocket attack it investigated was carried out by “armed opposition groups or by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham”. In October, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons published two reports into two alleged chemical weapon attacks on Idlib and Aleppo on 1 August 2016 and 24 November 2018, respectively. Neither established whether or not chemicals were used as weapons.

Israel continued air attacks targeting the Syrian government and Iranian and Hizbullah forces in Syria.

In June, the USA adopted the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act imposing sanctions on Syrian government officials, military officials and business people.

UNLAWFUL ATTACKS

Direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects by the Syrian government and Russia

Civilians in north-west Syria, including Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates, continued to face air and ground attacks, combined with dire humanitarian conditions. Between January and March, the Syrian government, backed by Russia, subjected civilians to unlawful attacks targeting residential areas and civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities and schools.¹

Residents, medical workers and teachers described how they endured relentless attacks on their homes, hospitals and

schools. A doctor said that in January, three air strikes in the vicinity of the hospital he worked at in Idlib flattened at least two nearby residential buildings and killed 11 civilians, including one of his colleagues. Evidence showed that Russia was responsible for the attack.

Denial of humanitarian access

The barrage of attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure in north-west Syria between December 2019 and March 2020, when a ceasefire was reached, pushed close to one million people to seek refuge in already overstretched displacement camps close to the Turkish border or in unfinished buildings, farms and schools, or on the streets. The displaced people lived in intolerable conditions, with limited access to adequate shelter, food and medication.

The spread of COVID-19 in north-west Syria further exacerbated the conditions and challenged humanitarian organizations, already struggling to meet needs. On 10 January, the UN Security Council extended until July the authorization of the mechanism that allowed the UN to deliver humanitarian aid to Syria across the border with Turkey. The resolution reduced the geographic scope of the mechanism from four to two crossings, Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam. After several failed attempts, the UN Security Council on 11 July adopted resolution 2533 extending the UN-facilitated delivery of aid from only Bab al-Hawa for 12 months.

Government forces continued to impede access to UN humanitarian aid agencies and Damascus-based international humanitarian organizations across Syria. A report published by Oxfam and the Norwegian Refugee Council in July described the challenges and obstacles imposed by government forces on the delivery of humanitarian aid, including bureaucratic impediments, interference in humanitarian activities, and restricting partnerships with Syrian NGOs and local communities.

ARBITRARY DETENTION AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

The Syrian government continued to subject tens of thousands of people, including journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers and political activists, to enforced disappearance.

It continued to resort to arbitrary detention to suppress peaceful protest and curb human rights and humanitarian activities. On 7 June, rare anti-government protests erupted in Sweida city in the southwest calling for “regime change” and better living conditions after rising unemployment and food prices, amongst other issues, ensued from the economic crisis. Between 9 and 16 June, security forces arbitrarily arrested at least 11 men for participating in the protests and denied them access to lawyers and their families.² They were released in July following pressure by community leaders.

In Daraa and Damascus Countryside governorates, government forces continued to arbitrarily detain former humanitarian workers, doctors, former civil defence members, political activists and local committee leaders even though they had gone through the so-called reconciliation agreement and received security clearance.

ABUSES BY ARMED GROUPS

Syrian National Army

The Syrian National Army (SNA), a pro-Turkey armed group, perpetrated a wide range of human rights abuses against civilians in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn, including looting, confiscation of property, arbitrary detention, abduction, and torture and other ill-treatment.

The looting and property confiscation particularly affected Syrian Kurds, who had left the area during hostilities in 2018 and 2019. In some incidents, fighters confiscated homes of remaining civilians after subjecting them to extortion, harassment, abduction and torture to force them to leave. They also threatened and arbitrarily detained people who filed complaints, forcing them to pay money for their release, according to the

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UN Commission of Inquiry).

The SNA arbitrarily detained and abducted civilians in Afrin and then tortured and otherwise ill-treated them for various reasons, including for criticizing SNA members and for formerly belonging to the PYD-led Autonomous Administration and its security and military branch. For example, in August armed group members took a 70-year-old Kurdish man from his home in Afrin and held him for two months after he had verbally condemned the beating of a young man by SNA fighters. They denied him access to his family who had to pay “intermediaries” a significant sum of money for his release. In addition, the armed group confiscated his car.

The SNA detained, raped and otherwise sexually assaulted women and girls, according to the UN Commission of Inquiry.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which controlled parts of north-west Syria, arbitrarily detained individuals who opposed their rule or ideology, including media activists, journalists, medical and humanitarian workers, and others. On 20 August, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham fighters arbitrarily detained a doctor, who was also the director of a medical school, for displaying drawings in an art exhibition deemed to violate Shari'a (Islamic law).

On several occasions between April and June, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham violently dispersed protests by shooting, beating and detaining protesters. Protests centred on the opening of commercial crossings between Idlib and Aleppo into government-controlled areas. On 10 June, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham beat and verbally abused 13 journalists filming a joint Russian-Turkish patrol on the M4 highway.

ABUSES BY THE PYD-LED AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

The PYD-led Autonomous Administration continued to control some of the predominantly Kurdish north-east region of Syria, including Raqqa and Qamishli. It arbitrarily detained humanitarian workers, political activists and Arabs.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, the military branch of the Autonomous Administration, continued to hold tens of thousands of people suspected of affiliation to IS in al-Hol camp in squalid conditions without access to legal recourse.

RIGHT TO HEALTH

The Syrian government failed to adequately protect health workers from COVID-19, or to provide a robust response to the spread of the disease and refused to provide transparent and consistent information about the country's outbreak.³

Thousands of lives continued to be at risk with no transparent and effective information or testing. Relatives of COVID-19 patients, medical professionals and humanitarian workers said that public hospitals had been forced to turn patients away due to a lack of beds, oxygen tanks and ventilators. In desperation, some residents were forced to rent oxygen tanks and ventilators at exorbitant fees.

The Syrian government's inadequate distribution of PPE endangered the lives of health workers. The Ministry of Health did not publish information about the impact of COVID-19 on health workers; the only available information is that which the Ministry reported to the UN. Syria's doctors' union reported that at least 61 health workers had died of the disease as of August, while official sources reported 15 deaths.

REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

By the end of the year, the number of people internally displaced in Syria since 2011 had reached 6.7 million, while 5.5 million people had sought refuge outside the country. Due

to limited resettlement places provided by western countries, the number of resettlement submissions by the most vulnerable Syrian refugees fell to 10,056 compared to 29,562 in 2019, according to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency.

Worsening humanitarian conditions in countries neighbouring Syria, with rising unemployment as well as administrative and financial obstacles to obtaining or renewing residency permits, continued to drive refugees to return to Syria. Between January and July, according to UNHCR, 21,618 Syrian refugees organized their own return from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Displaced people across Syria continued to live in overcrowded makeshift camps, schools and mosques that did not provide an adequate standard of living. They had limited access to aid, basic services, clean water, hygiene, food, health care, education and livelihood opportunities; and were at increased risk of contracting COVID-19.

Between January and March, the military offensive in north-west Syria led to nearly one million people fleeing to other parts of the country, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Between January and June, 204,000 people had returned to their homes. Thousands continued to be internally displaced in north-east Syria as a result of the military offensive launched by Turkey in 2019.

Al-Hol camp in al-Hasake governorate hosted the largest number of displaced people where around 65,000 individuals, the majority of them women and children, lived in dire conditions. Because of limited access to medical care in al-Hol, eight children under the age of five died between 6 and 10 August due to malnutrition-related complications, dehydration, heart failure, internal bleeding and other causes, according to UNICEF. Between January and August, the water supply from the Alouk water station in areas under the control of pro-Turkey armed groups was disrupted 13 times, cutting supply to residents and internally displaced people in al-Hasake city

as well as in Tel Tamer and surrounding areas, including in al-Hol and other camps.

RIGHT TO TRUTH, JUSTICE AND REPARATION

In April, the trial of two former officials of the Syrian government's security services charged with crimes against humanity started at the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany. On 18 September, the Netherlands invoked Syria's responsibility for gross human rights violations, particularly for torture under the UN Convention against Torture. Under the Convention, unless Syria and the Netherlands reach an agreement within six months, either party may refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice.

DEATH PENALTY

The death penalty remained in force for many offences. The authorities disclosed little information about death sentences passed, and provided no information on executions.

1. "Nowhere is safe for us": Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in north-west Syria (MDE 24/2089/2020)
2. Syria: Peaceful protesters detained in Sweida must be released immediately (Press release, 24 June)
3. Syria: Lack of adequate COVID-19 response puts thousands of lives at risk (Press release, 12 November)

TAIWAN

Taiwan

Head of state: Tsai Ing-wen

Head of government: Su Tseng-chang (replaced William Lai Ching-te in January)

The government took several measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, some of which threatened the right to privacy. Amendments to the Prison Act failed to address concerns about rights of people on death row with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. In August, a National Human Rights Commission was established. In October, the International Review Committee received reports from international organizations ahead of its

review of Taiwan's implementation of the ICCPR and the ICESCR.

MASS SURVEILLANCE

In January, the government introduced a series of measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19, some of which threatened the right to privacy. The government established a digital framework of mass surveillance and connected government databases, such as travel and health insurance records, for the purposes of tracking and tracing. Over 35 government departments were able to constantly monitor people's movement and other activities, including the purchase of surgical masks, through this platform. The government provided few details about its use of the platform, nor specified when the data collection measures would end.¹

DEATH PENALTY

Amendments to the Prison Act in January resulted in changes to the Regulations for the Execution of the Death Penalty in July. The amended regulations still allowed death sentences for individuals with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities.² The authorities made no progress towards abolition during the year and continued to carry out executions.³

RIGHT TO TRUTH, JUSTICE AND REPARATION

The National Human Rights Commission established as part of the Control Yuan (the government supervisory agency regulated by the Constitution) began work in August. The commission is composed of members appointed to act independently and mandated to investigate complaints of human rights violations, including discrimination, as well as drafting and publishing a national human rights report and advising government agencies.⁴

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Refugees and asylum-seekers received only limited assistance.⁵ Over 200 people from Hong Kong arrived in Taiwan seeking asylum after the enactment of a national security law