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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Joint written statement* submitted by the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status, International Educational Development, Inc., World Peace Council, non-governmental organizations on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 August 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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The Suffering of Syrian Civilians in an Everlasting War*

Introduction

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic continues to bring indescribable suffering to the civilian population and has turned the country into a deadly disaster. Today, half of the country's population – the number of inhabitants is estimated to be 22 million – has been forced to leave their homes; over 4 million people are in need of shelter, and 85% of the population is living in poverty. Furthermore, more than 4.9 million civilians – who live confined in hard-to-reach and besieged areas – face grave food shortages and lack of other supplies, as the access of humanitarian aid is being deliberately denied¹.

Amid turmoil, Syrian security forces have carried out endless attacks on areas controlled by ISIL and al Nursa guerrillas who have used civilians as human shields to protect their territories; and international coalitions have launched air strikes, which have inevitably affected the civilian population. Thus, all warring parties are responsible for horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity, and for the breach of international human rights and humanitarian law. Their actions have transformed Syria in an unending nightmare for civilians.

Since the beginning of the conflict in March 2011, more than 207,000 innocent civilians have been killed. From January to June 2017, 5,381 civilians lost their lives – and many of such losses are attributed to Iranian militias. In addition, further 814 civilians were killed in July 2017 alone².

The United Nations and the International Community have made several attempts to reach peace agreements and to liberate civilians from their miserable situation. For its part, the UN Human Rights Council has adopted around 30 resolutions on the human rights situation in the country; Fact Finding Missions as well as an Independent Commission of Inquiry³ have been set up to investigate and follow upon the situation; and Special Sessions have been called to take urgent action on the situation in Aleppo. Moreover, The European Union has imposed sanctions and embargos as pressuring measures on the Syrian Government, and it has held summits on the Syrian crisis. The UN Security Council has nominated a special envoy for Syria to moderate and promote peace talks⁴. Lastly, the international community has reached ceasefire agreements and has agreed on four de-escalation zones in Syria between Russian, Turkish, and Iranian representatives.

Unfortunately, no strategy has yet been effective enough. To date, no definitive solutions to the current plight of the long-suffering Syrian people has been found. As such, all parties to the conflict continue to indiscriminately kill civilians and to breach international agreements. For this reason, the death toll – that has reached 320,000 casualties – is destined to rise. Sadly, millions of Syrians still live hopeless and resigned to bear the brunt of their destiny.

Violations to International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law:

Civilians have been subjected to horrific human rights violations perpetrated by all parties, and they have been forced to leave their homes. Such exodus has caused colossal waves of internally displaced persons and refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries.

- Since the outset of the conflict, more than 117,000 people have been detained or disappeared. Those suspected of terrorism, both alleged terrorists and innocent civilians, often die in prison from starvation, infected cuts or summary execution. Survivors of the Sydnaya Prison – one of the most horrific detention centres located in north of the capital Damascus – reported how prisoners are brutally beaten and raped, and revealed that the cell floors are

1 Key Figures of the Humanitarian Needs Overview, available at: <http://hno-syria.org/#key-figures>

2 Key Figures of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, available at: <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2017/03/18/35726/>

3 Security Council Resolution S-17/1 of 23 August 2011

4 Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015)

covered with blood from prisoners' wounds. Additionally, according to their testimonies, detainees have no access to sunlight, food, water and medical care – as such, many of them die of preventable diseases⁵.

- Airstrikes on medical facilities and schools are continuously reported. In the first half of 2017, 69 members of medical personnel were killed in healthcare facilities following indiscriminate bombings. Last April, the Idlib governorate suffered a chemical attack that killed 74 persons and injured more than 600 people. In June, Syrian-Russian airstrikes in southern Daraa governorate hit a middle-school in the town of Tafas, killing around 10 civilians that were seeking refuge in the building. A local market in the besieged town of Kafr Batna was hit on July 16th; many civilians were killed and injured. Despite the announcing of a ceasefire in eastern Ghouta on July 22nd, around 50 missiles were reportedly launched since then. Additionally, in Ein Tarma town, a woman and a child were killed by missiles ground-to-ground launched in clear violation of the ceasefire and of all truce agreements.
- In hard-to-reach and besieged areas, humanitarian aid convoys have restricted access. In the meantime, people trapped inside have described their journeys as being fraught with peril, sniper activities, and unexploded landmines. In the north-eastern city of Ar-Raqqa, for example, violence has further intensified in July and between 30,000 and 50,000 civilians remain trapped.
- It is estimated that the current number of displaced persons in Syria reaches 6.36 million – such number amounts to approximately one third of the population. Currently, over one million IDPs live in “last resort” camps and shelters that are highly overcrowded and lack basic facilities. Some displaced persons live in rural areas where they are more vulnerable. Displaced persons are usually forced to flee with very little notification time. Neighbouring countries have limited and restricted access to people who escape the Syrian War, leaving hundreds of thousands of people stranded on borders in deplorable conditions. For example, over 50,000 Syrian civilians are stuck at the Syrian-Jordanian border. In most cases, these people cannot be reached by humanitarian aid convoys.
- To date, over 5 million Syrians – 48% of whom are minors – have fled the country⁷. Increasingly, Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers get scattered around the world; in fact, 1.2 million Syrians have applied for asylum in Europe since 2011. However, more and more governments are refusing to grant them humanitarian aid. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees is constantly calling on rich countries to share the burden that falls mostly on countries bordering Syria, and to honour their promises of resettling all Syrian refugees by 2018, in line with the Pledge Conference of Geneva. Turkey alone houses around three million Syrian refugees, Lebanon houses around 1 million, and Jordan has approximately 657,000 refugees. Additionally, thousands of Syrians are stuck on Greece's Aegean islands as a consequence of the agreement between the EU and Turkey that aimed at decreasing the wave of refugees entering the EU. As a result, Syrians live in temporary camps set up by the UNHCR, but, in some cases, their conditions are deplorable, as there is poor hygiene, and scantiness of food, water, medical supplies and reproductive services. If Syrian refugees are brave enough to go back, they have to pass through checkpoints where they are questioned for hours and risk to be detained by governmental forces or various armed militias.

Recommendations

We, NGOs Signatories to this statement recommend to the United Nations and its relevant bodies to:

- Call on all actors involved to promote peaceful negotiations to achieve political solutions to the Syrian conflict, respecting ceasefire agreements.
- Pressure all parties to the conflict to ensure the protection of civilians, and to avoid indiscriminate attacks against civilian facilities.

⁵ *Human Slaughterhouse Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison*, Amnesty International Report 2017, available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/webfm/Documents/issues/mde2454152017english.pdf>

⁶ *Syrian Arab Republic*, UNOCHA Report 2016 and updated, available at:

https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Syria/2017_Syria_hno.pdf

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Information Sharing Portal, retrieved in August 8th, 2017.

Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

- Call upon all parties to the conflict to cease the forcible displacement of civilians.
- Call on the international community to provide financial support to enable host countries to respond to the growing humanitarian needs of Syrian refugees.
- Pressure the Syrian government to allow humanitarian actors to safely access hard-to-reach areas, and to end the practice of besiegement.
- Urge the Syrian Government to cease the mistreatment and torture of detainees in prisons; to publish an official list of all detention facilities and to ensure that all prisoners receive adequate medical treatment.
- Call on the Syrian Government to release all arbitrarily detained persons.

*Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ), The Arab Lawyers Association- UK, The Brussels Tribunal, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, Association of Humanitarian Lawyers (AHL), The Iraqi Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), Association of Human Rights Defenders in Iraq (AHRD), Alliance to Renew Co-operation among Humankind, General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), Organisation for Justice & Democracy in Iraq (OJDI), The Iraqi Centre for Human Rights, International Anti-Occupation Network (IAON), NGOs without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.