

Siege of Syria's eastern Ghouta 'barbaric and medieval', says UN Commission of Inquiry

The siege of eastern Ghouta in war-torn Syria, which lasted more than five years, has been labelled "barbaric and medieval" – "amounting" to war crimes, and crimes against humanity, a high-level UN [inquiry](#) said on Wednesday.

In a 23-page report on the siege mounted against the densely populated suburb close to the capital Damascus, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic details the events that led to its recapture by pro-Government forces in April this year, following a "dramatically escalating" military campaign.

Neighbourhoods suffered aerial and ground bombardments "which claimed the lives of hundreds of Syrian men, women and children", the report notes, with "numerous homes, markets and hospitals all but razed to the ground".

These indiscriminate, "widespread and systematic bombardments" and the act of deliberately attacking protected objects, amounted to war crimes, it continues.

Commenting on the events in eastern Ghouta, Commission of Inquiry Chair, Paulo Pinheiro, condemned the civilian deaths as "abhorrent".

In addition to the deadly violence they faced, families were denied food and medicine, the veteran rights expert noted, before adding that "no warring party acted to protect the civilian population" during the last phase of the siege.

According to the report, between February and April this year, besieged armed groups and terrorist organizations based inside eastern Ghouta "relentlessly fired" unguided mortars into Damascus city and nearby areas, "killing and maiming" hundreds of Syrian civilians.

Insisting that "there can be no justification" for the indiscriminate shelling of inhabited areas, Commissioner Hanny Megally said that this, too, amounted to a war crime.

According to the report, by the time Government forces declared eastern Ghouta recaptured on 14 April, some 140,000 individuals had fled their homes and up to 50,000 were evacuated to Idlib and Aleppo governorates.

"Tens of thousands" of people have been unlawfully interned by Government forces in what the report's authors call "managed sites" in rural Damascus, which includes Ghouta.

Their number includes women and children, which is "reprehensible",

Commissioner Karen Koning AbuZayd said.

The report is scheduled to be formally presented next week, on 26 June, during an interactive dialogue at the [current session](#) of the Human Rights Council.

[UN agency chiefs issue 'call to action' on behalf of refugee children](#)

Protecting refugee children is “a test of our shared humanity,” two top United Nations officials said on Wednesday.

The statement by Filippo Grandi, [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#), and Henrietta Fore, Executive Director of the [UN Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#) came in an editorial published on the website for CNN, the US-based cable and online news network.

Wednesday is [World Refugee Day](#), which is marked annually, each 20 June, when the UN system highlights the strength, courage and perseverance of refugees across the world, and calls on the public to show support for families forced to flee.

“Here is our call to action: refugee children, whether on our doorsteps, or in remote borderlands, must be protected, sheltered and equipped for their futures,” wrote the agency chiefs.

“Our ability to make a difference in their lives – between despair and hope, and being left behind and building a future – is a test of our shared humanity.”

Globally, more than 68 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes, with children making up more than half the world's refugee population.

Our ability to make a difference in their lives – between despair and hope, and being left behind and building a future – is a test of our shared humanity – *Filippo Grandi, UNHCR and Henrietta Fore, UNICEF*

Furthermore, nearly 174,000 refugee and asylum-seeking children have been separated from their families or forced to flee on their own.

With conflicts multiplying and intensifying in recent years, thus creating millions more refugees and displaced people, “governments seem to have overlooked their duty of care to children,” the UN agency chiefs stated,

adding “perhaps it is because the statistics can be so staggering that they harden us to the human suffering that underpins them.”

They stressed that all “children on the move” should receive the same care and compassion as any other child.

“Children are first and foremost children – and regardless of their nationality, their legal status, or that of their parents, their welfare and rights must be at the center of our actions,” they said.

The UN officials recalled the “unthinkable suffering” refugee children endure in their quest for safety, only to face hostility and rejection when they arrive.

“Turned away by border guards and impenetrable barbed wire fences, kept in detention centers, or separated from their parents – the violence that propelled them from their countries is perpetuated by the hostile reception they receive,” they said.

However, if young refugees are provided with a safe environment, an education and opportunities, they will flourish and contribute to their host countries and help rebuild their homelands when conditions allow, the UN officials added.

They looked to the implementation of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), which will be presented to world leaders meeting at the UN later this year.

It calls for investments in communities hosting refugees, fair and humane asylum policies, and more opportunities for resettlement and family reunification, among other proposals.

[Replacement for United States on Human Rights Council to be elected ‘as soon as possible’](#)

International reaction to the United States decision to withdraw from the [UN Human Rights Council](#) continued on Wednesday with the President of the Geneva-based assembly confirming that the election of a new Member State would take place “as soon as possible” to fill the vacant seat.

The development follows an announcement on Tuesday by Nikki Haley, US Ambassador to the UN, that the US was pulling out after repeated warnings during the past year that the Council was allegedly biased against Israel and in need of major reform.

Speaking hours after the US move, [Vojislav Šuc](#) said that the poll would take place once US “notification of withdrawal is formally received”.

Members are elected by majority vote at the UN General Assembly in New York and Mr. Šuc told the 47-State body in Geneva that he intended to “be in touch” with its President, [Miroslav Lajčák](#), about choosing a replacement to complete the unfinished US term.

Commenting on the development, Mr. Lajčák’s office issued a [statement](#) noting his regret at the move.

The US had traditionally played a “strong human rights advocacy role” across the world, the text explained, before adding that in view of today’s global challenges, the President of the General Assembly “believes that our collective work to ensure a better world will benefit from more dialogue and collaboration – not less”.

Also reacting to the US decision, UN human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussein described it as “disappointing, if not really surprising”.

The US should be “stepping up, not stepping back” given the state of human rights today, the UN High Commissioner tweeted, echoing comments by UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) that he would have “much preferred” the US to remain.

At the start of the Council’s thirty-eighth session on Monday – which is also Zeid’s last session before his mandate ends – he defended multilateralism and rounded on the rise of what he described as “chauvinistic nationalism” as the greatest threat to the world.

Too many Governments had failed to make a success of the UN by “feigning a commitment to the common effort”, the High Commissioner continued, before highlighting rights concerns in more than 20 countries, including Israel and the US.

Under General Assembly rules, membership of the Human Rights Council is open to all UN Member States.

It is based on fair geographical representation and members serve for three years at a time. They are not eligible for immediate re-election after two consecutive terms.

The US was first elected to the Council in 2009, three years after the Geneva body was created by the General Assembly as the organization’s principal political human rights body, replacing the Commission on Human Rights.

It is only halfway through its current term.

Challenges remain in DPRK despite “slight” improvements in health, wellbeing: UNICEF

The health and wellbeing of women and children in North Korea has improved slightly in recent years but “urgent” challenges remain in rural areas, the UN Children’s Fund, [UNICEF](#), said on Wednesday.

Analysing information gathered from more than 8,500 households across the country, known officially as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, on everything from child labour, to the kind of fuel that families use to stay warm, the agency says that it has built up a “snapshot” of the lives of ordinary citizens in DPRK.

According to [the DPRK survey](#), nearly 40,000 severely malnourished children received treatment in 2017 and more than 700,000 youngsters and mothers took nutritional supplements last year.

The survey, which was carried out with UNICEF’s support on the ground, also shows that one in five children was stunted in 2017, compared with more than one in four in 2012.

The growth indicator – which is used to highlight chronic or recurrent malnutrition – highlights significant differences between urban and rural areas.

In the capital Pyongyang, 10 per cent of children are affected by stunting, while in Ryanggang Province more than three times that percentage suffer, UNICEF Regional Director for East Asia and the Pacific, Karin Hulshof, told journalists in Geneva.

Youngsters in certain rural areas “urgently require much more support”, she cautioned, adding that there is “a big difference between the capital city and the countryside: an urban-rural divide”.

Among the other findings of the 2017 DPR Korea MICS Survey Findings Report are indicators showing that one in 10 children suffers from diarrhoea – a leading contributor to malnutrition and death.

In 2009, 67 per cent of children were treated with oral rehydration salts, increasing to 74 per cent last year.

The latest survey also reveals that more than one third of household drinking water is contaminated, making access to safe water and sanitation “a priority” for UNICEF in DPRK, Ms Hulshof said.

Once again, the situation is worst in rural areas, where nearly half of children are “still exposed to significant risks of illness and

malnourishment”.

UNICEF and its partners are helping by installing gravity-supplied water systems to remote communities and “more houses now have access to clean water, which is good news,” Ms Hulshof said.

Other findings indicate that seven per cent of five to 11-year-olds are involved in child labour and that most households use coal or wood rather than cleaner fuel sources to heat their homes.

Defending the value of the survey and welcoming the “improved seriousness and openness” of the DPRK, the UNICEF official said that this new approach “could transform the lives” of tens of thousands of children – although much more needed to be done.

[UN chief hails ‘very important role’ of Human Rights Council, as US withdraws, citing alleged bias](#)

In response to the withdrawal of the United States on Tuesday from the United Nations body which is designed to promote and protect human rights around the globe, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) said that he would have “much preferred” the US remain.

In a statement issued by Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric, the UN chief said that the Geneva-based Human Rights Council was a part of the UN’s overall “Human Rights architecture”, which “plays a very important role in the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide.”

[The Human Rights Council](#) is a 47-member inter-governmental body within the UN system, that not only seeks to promote and protect human rights, but also addresses alleged rights violations and makes recommendations on them.

It’s a forum for discussing all thematic human rights issues and situations that require its attention, throughout the year. The members are elected by the UN General Assembly.

“The Secretary-General would have much preferred for the United States to remain in the Human Rights Council,” said the statement on Tuesday night.

The US announced its decision shortly beforehand, when according to news reports, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley appeared together with Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. They accused the Council of displaying entrenched bias against Israel, and criticized what they said was the body’s willingness to admit

nations which were themselves human rights abusers.

Ambassador Haley, according to reports, noted that the move did not signify in any way, that the US was retreating from its own human rights commitments.