

[A record one million Syrians displaced over six months, during six key battles: UN investigators](#)

All parties to the seven-year Syria conflict and the States that support them should do “everything in their power” to prevent a full-scale military assault on Idlib, a high-level [United Nations-appointed](#) panel of investigators said on Wednesday.

“All the other disasters would be minor events compared to what can happen in Idlib,” said Paulo Pinheiro, chair of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

At a press conference in Geneva, to discuss the panel’s latest findings on rights violations committed in Syria, Mr. Pinheiro called on “all parties to the conflict and those states who support them, to do everything in their power to prevent a massacre in Idlib”.

The development comes amid growing international calls for a de-escalation of violence in and around the north-west region, which is home to nearly three million people. They are some of the victims of an “unprecedented” level of internal displacement across Syria, according to the report.

On Tuesday, UN Secretary-General [António Guterres](#) urged those involved in the more than seven-year war to avoid a further escalation, warning that failure to do so would unleash “a humanitarian nightmare unlike any seen in the blood-soaked Syrian conflict” so far.

The UN chief also underscored that while the presence of terrorist groups sheltering in Idlib could not be tolerated, fighting terrorism “does not absolve warring parties of their core obligations under international law”.

Some 10,000 fighters that have been identified as terrorists by the UN are believed to be living in Idlib, in among 2.9 million civilians, Mr. Pinheiro said. The protection of civilians was paramount, he insisted:

“Of course, you don’t have anything against fighting against terrorists, but something has to be done to protect the rights of three million people and one million children. I think that this is something that has to move the powers involved in this decision.”

Unprecedented levels of civilian displacement

The latest Commission of Inquiry report is its 16th update on the conflict, as mandated by the [Human Rights Council](#) in August 2011.

A father and his three children in Douma City, Syria, after having returned

from displacement in Al-Dwair, one of the sheltering sites in Rural Damascus that received people from East Ghouta fleeing heavy fighting. 1 July 2018.
UNHCR/Vivian Tou'meh

It details how in under six months this year, as pro-Government forces moved to recapture large swathes of territory, more than one million Syrian men, women, and children were displaced in six key battles.

Most now face dire living conditions, Hanny Megally, Member of the Commission of Inquiry, told journalists in Geneva.

"Many of them are living in tents," he said. "Many of them are living in destroyed property...So any further deterioration of their living situations is of great concern."

Witnesses consistently recalled the distinctive smell of chlorine at the affected sites and on victims' clothing – *Commission of Inquiry report on Syria*

The panel's 24-page report highlights intense fighting between January and June in Aleppo, northern Homs, Damascus, Rif Damascus, Dara'a, and Idlib governorates.

Most battles were marked by war crimes by all belligerents, it says, including launching indiscriminate attacks, deliberately attacking protected objects, using prohibited weapons, pillaging and/or forced displacement.

In other instances, parties to the conflict failed to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians, as required by international humanitarian law.

Noting the "extremely high cost" to civilians of the battle to regain territory, Mr Megally said that some areas including Yarmouk camp in Damascus and parts of eastern Ghouta had been so heavily destroyed "that there is no foreseeable possibility of civilian return".

The panel's findings also detail alleged chemical weapons attacks by Government forces in heavily populated areas of Douma, eastern Ghouta, earlier this year. "Witnesses consistently recalled the distinctive smell of chlorine at the affected sites and on victims' clothing," the report reads.

On the munitions allegedly used in the Douma attacks, the report indicates that "material evidence...indicated a type known to have been used only by Government forces or, rarely by militias".

"What we've identified is rockets that were manufactured in Iran, that have been adapted in Syria and have been adapted in a way that they could be used, it seems, to then be filled up with chlorine and used in some of these chlorine attacks," Mr. Megally said.

Alarming level of reprisals against activists, human rights defenders, and victims – new UN report

An alarming and “shameful” level of harsh reprisals and intimidation against those who cooperate with the United Nations in an effort to uphold human rights, has been revealed by a new UN report launched on Wednesday.

The ninth annual [report](#) of [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) details the level of retaliation against human rights defenders on a country-by-country basis, including allegations of killing, torture, arbitrary arrests, and public stigmatization campaigns, which also target victims of rights abuse.

The report documents allegations of reprisals and intimidation in 38 countries, some of which are members of the Human Rights Council.

Prior to officially presenting the Human Rights Council with the report next week, assistant rights chief Andrew Gilmour said: “The cases of reprisals and intimidation detailed in this report and its two annexes represent the tip of the iceberg,” adding that “many more are reported to us.”

“We are also increasingly seeing legal, political and administrative hurdles used to intimidate – and silence – civil society,” he flagged. The report points out that selective laws and new legislation are restricting and obstructing organizations from cooperating with the UN, including by limiting their funding capacity, especially from foreign donors.

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According to the report, the fear of reprisals is not only visible in the field, where UN personnel often encounter people who are too-frightened to speak with them, but also at what would perhaps be regarded as safe spaces such as UN Headquarters in New York, Geneva and elsewhere.

Against the backdrop of numerous non-governmental organizations, human rights defenders, activists and experts having been labelled “terrorists” by their governments, it highlights a “disturbing trend” of national security and counter-terrorism strategies used to block UN access to communities and civil society organizations.

“The real global threat of terrorism notwithstanding, this issue must be tackled without compromising respect for human rights,” the report says.

The wide scope of reprisals greatly inhibits the UN's work, including in conflict settings, when delivering humanitarian assistance or in protecting civilians, it adds.

The report recognizes the need for more information collection on acts of intimidation and reprisal, including by documenting and analyzing incidents experienced by women, human rights defenders and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. It also encourages all stakeholders to report allegations of intimidation and reprisals for cooperating with the UN on human rights as they occur, to ensure follow-up and action.

"As the Secretary-General has said, we should all be deeply shocked and angered by the extent to which civil society actors suffer reprisals because of their work, including when they cooperate with the UN," Mr. Gilmour said.

"But shock and anger must translate into real action," he continued. "Governments can do much more to stop reprisals, ensure that they do not recur, and hold those responsible to account for their actions."

The countries named in Annex 1 of the report, in which new cases are listed (in alphabetical order), are: Bahrain, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, India, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Mali, Morocco, Myanmar, Philippines, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela.

Countries named in Annex 2, where the UN has been following up, and where cases are ongoing, are: Algeria, Bahrain, Burundi, China, Egypt, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, Myanmar, Pakistan, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Venezuela.

[Yemen: UN envoy asks Security Council for more support 'to move back' to the negotiating table](#)

"The level of confidence is at its [lowest](#) and the human and humanitarian cost is ever rising," said the UN's chief Yemen negotiator, by video link from Jordan, noting that "the war has been virtually on all fronts," and the parties "locked into a cycle of violence."

At the same time, he pointed to the Yemeni people, the war's main victims, who yearn for a peaceful political solution to end their suffering, terminate the war and deliver a functioning government to address their basic needs.

"This is no longer a race between political and military institutions and solutions," he continued. "It is, instead, a race to salvage what is left of state institutions as quickly as possible."

Following months of discussions with the parties after the negotiating process had been stalled for two years, he called on 2 August for formal consultations that could kickstart new peace talks.

While Mr. Griffiths acknowledged that things have not been going as planned, he pointed out that the peace process had been relaunched.

"The Yemeni political process, like so many other of its kind, will see ups and downs," he asserted. Calling them "temporary hurdles to be overcome," the UN envoy underscored that though dire, the situation can be addressed through formal consultations.

"We need to stay focused on nurturing the political process, particularly in this, these fragile early stages, and build the needed momentum so that it can deliver tangible benefits to Yemenis throughout Yemen," Mr. Griffiths stated, saying that political will, determination and commitment from all actors, including the Council, was required, along with "putting the interests of the Yemeni people above all else."

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particularly in this, these fragile early stages, and build the
needed momentum so that it can deliver tangible benefits – *UN
Yemen envoy*

He defined his own role as encouraging the parties "while reminding them of the need to respect their obligations and responsibilities toward the Yemeni people and the international community."

Mr. Griffiths expressed concern over the attacks launched by Houthi forces towards Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea, which he said illustrated "the continued threat of this conflict towards regional security."

Turning to the economic situation, he cited widespread demonstrations in the southern governorates, elaborating that rising frustrations threaten conflict there.

"The protestors gave voice to their concern over the economic situation and basic service delivery, and they remind of the importance of listening to southern voices and ensuring their meaningful participation in the arrangements that put an end to this conflict," he said.

Mr. Griffiths flagged that he would continue discussions through various visits, including by engaging with the political leadership of the Yemeni government in Oman, and the Houthis, who still hold the capital, Sana'a.

As the first of two objectives for his visit, he aims to shape key confidence-building measures, including on prisoner exchanges and opening the

Sana'a airport. Secondly, he hopes to secure a commitment from the parties to convene consultations.

"I am also planning to consult very soon with a number of southern stakeholders to agree on their meaningful participation in the process," he said.

The UN envoy underscored that inclusivity is crucial for success and that at different stages, he would engage Yemeni society.

He concluded by saying that although "the road to peace is never straight," it does not mean that the process is more difficult, but instead more urgent, and asked the Council for its continued support "to move back to the table with all speed."

Speaking to reporters afterwards, the President of the Security Council, US Ambassador, Nikki Haley, read out a Press Statement, expressing regret, that the Houthi delegation did not attend the meeting last week in Geneva "despite great efforts by the UN and other States, to address their concerns. They welcome the Special Envoy's intention to go to Sana'a."

She added that "the Members of the Security Council reiterated that only a political solution can end the conflict and alleviate the humanitarian suffering. She said they were urging all sides to "get behind" the process that Mr. Griffiths is leading.

[Devastating storms like Hurricane Florence 'unusual this far north': UN weather agency](#)

In another manifestation of extreme weather conditions, hurricanes as strong as the Category 4 storm Florence – barreling towards the coast of the Carolinas in the United States – are rarely seen so far north, the United Nation's weather agency ([WMO](#)) confirmed on Tuesday.

Hurricane Florence is ranked as a category 4 hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale. According to the US National Hurricane Center, category 4 hurricanes are ranked as major hurricanes, with winds at 130-156 mph (209-251 km/h), and a likelihood of catastrophic damage.

Hurricane Florence, currently moving West over the northern Atlantic, is currently moving West over the Atlantic Ocean between Bermuda and the Bahamas and is forecast to approach the coast of North Carolina or South Carolina on

Thursday.

A spokesperson for the WMO described Hurricane Florence as “very large, very strong and very dangerous. Florence is expected to be an extremely dangerous major hurricane through Thursday. It’s a very big hurricane which can be seen from space”.

One of the main dangers from hurricane Florence is the rainfall, added the spokesperson. There is currently a 1-7 day rainfall forecast of more than 10-15 inches (254 to 381 mm).

WMO Secretary-General [Petteri Taalas](#) spoke to UN News on Monday at UN Headquarters in New York where, on the same day, UN chief [António Guterres](#) delivered a speech describing climate change as “[the defining issue of our time](#)”, and calling for more leadership and greater ambition for climate action.

Mr. Taalas confirmed that we are seeing the highest worldwide temperatures since records began. “We have been breaking records in some parts of the world. We have seen heatwaves hitting Japan, Europe – especially the northern part of Europe – where a large part of the harvest has been lost, and we have seen quite devastating fires hitting Canada and western parts of the USA,” he told us.

“We just saw a record-breaking typhoon hitting Japan a couple of days ago, the most intense typhoon in Japan for the past 25 years. Japan was also exposed to very intense rainfall, leading to flooding and landslides, with casualties.”

Although the early part of the Atlantic hurricane season was quiet, there are now three active hurricanes moving across the ocean (Florence, Isaac and Helene).

There have been 10 other years on record where we have had at least 3 hurricanes simultaneously, most recently last year (Irma, Jose and Katia)

In the Pacific Ocean, Typhoon Manghut, a very strong tropical cyclone and the largest currently active, is expected to impact the northern part of the Philippines later in the week.

[‘Vague and over-broad’ laws stifling independent journalism in Myanmar – UN rights report](#)

Describing the conviction in Myanmar of two Reuters journalists last week as

a “particularly outrageous” example of judicial harassment against the media there, “vague and over-broad” laws have made it impossible for the press to do its job in the country, without fear or favour, a new United Nations report has found.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, whose Office (OHCHR) issued the report Tuesday, underscored that the findings show the severity of dangers independent journalists face in Myanmar.

“Where [journalists are jailed for merely visiting an area controlled by an armed group](#), when their sources are jailed for providing information from conflict zones, and where a Facebook post can result in criminal defamation accusations – such an environment is hardly conducive to a democratic transition,” she said.

According to the report, [The Invisible Boundary: Criminal prosecutions of journalism in Myanmar](#), laws relating to telecommunications, official secrets, unlawful associations, electronic transactions and even obscure laws relating to imports and aircraft, have been used to try and prosecute journalists in recent years.

In one case, three journalists were arrested in June 2017 for covering an event to mark the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in an area under the control of an armed group in northern Shan state. They were charged under the Unlawful Associations Act. The case was dropped, but not before they had spent 67 days in detention.

Together, the cases outline to journalists a clear choice between self-censorship and the risk of prosecution [...] Given the importance of journalism for the public’s right to information, the restrictions imposed on media personnel have a broader implication in society – *OHCHR report*

In another case, two Christian Baptists from Kachin state, were arrested in December 2016 under the same law, for assisting journalists who had travelled to northern Shan state to report on the conflict there. They were held incommunicado for several weeks and eventually received prison sentences of two years and three months having also been charged under an Import-Export statute, relating to their alleged use of unlicensed motorbikes, the report states.

Other cases involved the invocation of the same Law against journalists for using a drone to film the national parliament building and a Telecommunications statute was used to target a journalist for posts on the social media site, Facebook.

The report also refers to “the instrumentalization of the law and of the courts by the Government and military in what constitutes a political campaign against independent journalism,” and the “failure of the judiciary to uphold the fair trial rights of those targeted.”

In conclusion, the report also sets out a series of recommendations, including a review of all legal provisions impacting the right to freedom of expression with a view to repealing or amending those that do not comply with international human rights law.

It also calls for the immediate and unconditional release of the [two Reuters journalists](#), Kyaw Soe Oo (also known as Moe Aung) and Thet Oo Maung (also known as Wa Lone), as well as all other journalists currently in detention for the “legitimate and peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression”.

The two Reuters journalists were sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment under the Official Secrets Act in connection with their coverage of a massacre, by the military, of men from the minority Muslim Rohingya community in the Inn Dinn village, Rakhine state.