

Syria: UN probe documents use of chemical weapons and other crimes against civilians

6 September 2017 – Despite reduced violence in some places in Syria, warring parties continued to perpetrate unthinkable crimes against civilians, including the use of chemical weapons by Government forces, a group of United Nations investigators said today as they released a new report.

“It underscores once more how Syrian men, women, and children throughout the country remain the primary victims of violence perpetrated by the pro-Government forces, anti-Government armed groups, terrorist organisations and their affiliates,” Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the [UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria](#), told a press conference in Geneva, launching the report.

In its fourteenth report to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council, covering the period between March and July this year, the Commission noted that the Syrian air force used sarin in opposition-held Khan Shaykhun on 4 April, killing over 80 people, most of whom were women and children.

A [press release](#) issued by the Commission noted that such attacks constitute clear violations of international humanitarian law and the Convention on Chemical Weapons, which Syria ratified in 2013 following a previous sarin attack.

“Reporting on such heinous crimes and violations is the core of our work,” said the Commission Chair, adding that the panel has a duty to attribute responsibility accordingly, regardless of the perpetrator.

Mr. Pinheiro said that most incidents in which civilians are killed and maimed involve the unlawful use of conventional weapons, such as cluster munitions and explosive weapons in civilian populated areas.

The report also examined local truces. The so-called “Four Towns Agreement” incorporated evacuation agreements which resulted in the forced displacement of civilians, a war crime.

“Civilians did not leave these locations voluntarily,” Mr. Pinheiro said, explaining that most were never consulted and they felt they had no other choice, fearing such reprisals as arrests and forced conscription if they stayed.

The report also documented several incidents perpetrated by the terrorist groups Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra) and ISIL, and by armed group fighters.

Terrorist and other armed groups targeted religious minorities through car and suicide bombings, the use of snipers and hostage-taking, including in areas controlled by the Syrian Government. In al-Rashidin (Aleppo), a single

car bombing killed 96 people, including 68 internally displaced children, from previously besieged Fu'ah and Kafraya (Idlib).

The report also found that US forces failed to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects when attacking alleged terrorists and destroying part of a mosque complex in al-Jinah, Aleppo, in March, in violation of international humanitarian law.

Investigations are ongoing into allegations that international coalition airstrikes, carried out as part of the ongoing offensive to repel ISIL from Raqqa, have resulted in increasingly alarming numbers of civilian casualties.

The Commission is gravely concerned that this offensive has led to the internal displacement of some 190,000 people, with the fate of some 20,000 others precarious as they remain trapped in Raqqa.

Investigations also continue into allegations that before fleeing Syria, ISIL fighters are trying to sell enslaved Yazidi women and girls – victims of the ongoing and largely unaddressed genocide, according to the Commission.

The other Commission members are Karen AbuZayd and Carla Del Ponte.