

War crimes committed by all parties in battle for Aleppo – UN-mandated inquiry on Syria

1 March 2017 – The battle late last year for control over Syria’s war-ravaged Aleppo was a stage of unrelenting violence, with civilians on both sides falling victim to war crimes committed by all parties, read a report issued today by the United Nations-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

The report documents brutal tactics employed by the parties to the conflict in the country as they engaged in the decisive battle for the once iconic city between July and December 2016, resulting in unparalleled suffering for Syrian men, women and children.

“The violence in Aleppo documented in our report should focus the international community on the continued, cynical disregard for the laws of war by the warring parties in Syria,” said Paulo Pinheiro, the Chair of the three-member Commission, which was mandated by the UN Human Rights Council.

“The deliberate targeting of civilians has resulted in the immense loss of human life, including hundreds of children,” he added.

The report notes that the siege-like tactics employed by pro-Government forces in eastern Aleppo last year trapped civilians without adequate food or medical supplies, and that between July and December, Syrian and Russian forces carried out daily air strikes, claiming hundreds of lives and reducing hospitals, schools and markets to rubble.

It adds that Syrian forces also used chlorine bombs – a chemical agent prohibited under international law – in residential areas, resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties. The Commission also notes that it received reports of use of cluster munitions in densely populated areas.

Furthermore, by late December, when pro-Government forces on the ground took control over eastern Aleppo, no functioning hospitals remained.

The intentional targeting of these medical facilities amounted to war crimes, the Commission concludes.

Attack on UN/Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy

In the course of its investigations, the Commission also examined an attack on a UN/Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy in Orum al-Kubra in Aleppo’s countryside by the Syrian Air Force. The attack killed 14 aid workers, destroyed 17 trucks carrying aid supplies, and led to the suspension of all humanitarian aid in the country.

“Under no circumstances can humanitarian aid workers be targeted,”

underscored Commissioner Carla del Ponte, adding: "A deliberate attack against them such as the one that took place in Orum al-Kubra amounts to war crimes and those responsible must be held accountable for their actions."

Indiscriminate attacks by armed groups

Further in the report, the Commission also notes that armed groups indiscriminately shelled civilian-inhabited areas of western Aleppo with improvised weapons, such as rocket-assisted munitions and mortars, resulting in extensive civilian casualties. A number of these attacks were carried out without a clear military target and had no other purpose than to terrorise the civilian population.

The report also states that in some districts, armed groups shot at civilians to prevent them from leaving, effectively using them as human shields.



Chairperson of the Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria Paulo Pinheiro (right) and Carla del Ponte, Member of the Commission, at a briefing on its special inquiry into events in Aleppo. UN Photo/Violaine Martin

It also notes that pro-Government forces on the ground, composed mostly of Syrian and foreign militias, executed hors de combat fighters and perceived opposition supporters, including family members of fighters.

Forced displacement of civilians

The 37-page document reveals that the eastern Aleppo evacuation agreement forced thousands of civilians – despite a lack of military necessity or deference to the choice of affected individuals – to move to Government-controlled western Aleppo whilst others were taken to Idlib where they are once more living under bombardments.

"Some of these agreements amount to forced displacement. It is imperative that the parties refrain from similar future agreements and provide the conditions for the safe return of those who wish to go back to their homes in eastern Aleppo", said Commissioner Karen AbuZayd.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria was established by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate and record all violations of international law since March 2011.

The report is based on 291 interviews, including with residents of Aleppo, and the review of satellite imagery, photographs, videos and medical records. It is scheduled to be presented to current session of the Council on 14 March during an interactive dialogue.

DR Congo security forces committed rights violations against protestors in December 2016 – UN probe

1 March 2017 – Defence and security forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) used excessive, disproportionate and at times lethal force to prevent and contain demonstrations in December 2016, in violation of international human rights law and standards, a UN report has found.

“Measures should also be taken, at all levels, to ensure that the legitimate exercise of fundamental freedoms by the population will not lead to loss of lives and other serious rights violations,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said today in a news release on the report.

The report is based on the findings of the investigation conducted by the human rights team comprising staff of the UN Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) and of the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

According to the report, at least 40 people, including five women and two children, were killed between 15 and 31 December 2016 across several cities of the DRC, among them the capital Kinshasa, as well as Lubumbashi, Boma and Matadi. The victims include 28 individuals who were killed by soldiers of the Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC), six by agents of the Police Nationale Congolaise (PNC) and six during joint PNC and FARDC operations.

The report also revealed that all but two of the victims were killed by live ammunition. During the same period, at least 147 people were injured by State agents, including 14 women and 18 children, and at least 917 individuals, including 30 women and 95 children, were arrested by defence and security forces.

“Such serious incidents are worrisome, particularly in the current context,” said Maman Sambo Sidikou, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative in the DRC, citing the need to create an environment conducive to the holding of peaceful elections.

The lack of accountability for past human rights violations, including those committed during the demonstrations in Kinshasa on 19 and 20 September 2016, may have encouraged a sense of impunity, and defence and security forces to commit further violations in December 2016.

“Once again we see serious human rights violations being committed blatantly and with complete impunity by the security forces, who employed excessive use of force against unarmed demonstrators, in flagrant violation of international human rights law and standards,” said the UN human rights chief, Mr. Zeid.

He urged the Government to bring those responsible for such violations to justice and urgently adopt the law on freedom of peaceful protests and the law on human rights defenders.

'Make some noise' for safe, supportive HIV/AIDS care, says UN on Zero Discrimination Day

1 March 2017 – The United Nations agency leading the world's HIV/AIDS response is urging everyone to 'make some noise' for zero discrimination in healthcare settings.

Healthcare settings should be safe and supportive environments. It is unacceptable that discrimination is inhibiting access to care today," said Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), in his message for Zero Discrimination Day.

Eliminating discrimination in health-care settings is critical, and we must demand that it become a reality," Mr. Sidibé added.

The right to health is a fundamental human right that includes access to affordable, timely and quality health-care services for all, yet discrimination remains widespread in health-care settings, creating a serious barrier to access to HIV services.

Data from 50 countries from the People Living with HIV Stigma Index cited by UNAIDS show that one in eight people living with HIV report being denied health care.

Around 60 per cent of European Union/European Economic Area countries report that stigma and discrimination among health-care professionals remains a barrier to the provision of adequate HIV prevention services for men who have sex with men and people who inject drugs.

Each year on 1 March, the world marks Zero Discrimination Day to highlight how everyone can be part of the transformation and take a stand for a fair and just society," according to the press release.

Everyone has the right to be treated with respect, to live free from discrimination, coercion and abuse," said Mr. Sidibé.

Discrimination doesn't just hurt individuals it hurts everyone, whereas welcoming and embracing diversity in all its forms brings benefits for all."

UN rights office disappointed with Thai Government's refusal to criminalize enforced disappearance

28 February 2017 – The United Nations human rights office today urged the Government of Thailand to criminalize enforced or voluntary disappearance and torture.

The announcement follows news last week that National Legislative Assembly – the military-appointed parliament – decided not to enact a bill that would have done just that.

“The Assembly’s decision to reject the bill is very concerning given the continued allegations of torture and disappearances in Thailand, and it is deeply worrying that such actions may now continue without any legal redress,” Ravina Shamdasani told journalists in Geneva.

Ms. Shamdasani, the spokesperson for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), characterized the decision to not enact the bill as “a devastating blow” to the families of those who have disappeared.

Since 1980, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Voluntary Disappearances recorded 82 cases of enforced disappearances in the country.

Those include the disappearances of respected lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit in 2004 and Karen human rights activist Pholachi “Billy” Rakchongcharoen in 2014.

Speaking to the press, Ms. Shamdasani also raised concern about the increasing number of criminal cases brought against human rights defenders in Thailand for reporting allegations of torture and ill-treatment.

Sustainable Development Goals critical for better future for all – deputy UN chief Amina Mohammed

28 February 2017 – Delivering her first address as the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed underlined that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are essential for a safe and secure future that brings

prosperity, opportunity and human rights for all.

“Around the world, success in achieving the SDGs will ease global anxieties, provide a better life for women and men and build a firm foundation for stability and peace in all societies, everywhere,” said Ms. Mohammed at the opening of the 2017 Economic and Social Council segment on Operational Activities for Development.

Ms. Mohammed, earlier today, was administered the oath of office by Secretary-General António Guterres at a ceremony at the UN Headquarters in New York.

“Success will require a bolder approach to financing and partnerships. Nothing will be achieved without engaging all actors,” she added, urging all countries to rethink systems, approaches, redefine traditional planning, delivery and monitoring.

She also said that the UN too needed to be “fit for purpose” to help its Member States implement 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

“We must innovate, and revamp our approach to partnership and financing, with a focus on the long haul. We must empower youth to participate in and shape the political and economic lives of their countries and communities; to be the agents of peace and development,” she noted.

Further in her remarks, the deputy UN chief also highlighted that despite much progress, Africa continued to remain vulnerable, and therefore needs to be a UN priority.



Opening of the 2017 Economic and Social Council segment on Operational Activities for Development. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Noting that efforts should be stepped to support the least developed, landlocked and small island developing states to reduce vulnerability and build resilience, she added that “It is critical that, across the world, we focus on those furthest behind first. Because in all regions, the rising tide of optimism and empowerment, has not yet reached everyone.”

She also underlined the need to address growing inequalities around the globe as well as combat gender discrimination which continues to limit the opportunities and potential of women and girls in all countries.

Looking ahead, Ms. Mohammed said that focus would be based on broadly three principles: strengthening impartial leadership of the UN development system for coherence and integration at all levels; addressing the trust deficit to entail accountability and transparency at all levels; and being responsive to national priorities.

“Solutions from the past will not, alone, meet the challenges of the future,” she underlined.

The UN Deputy Secretary-General also spoke of the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) process that established a sequenced approach to the review of the UN development system as well as on the empowerment of Resident Coordinators and implementation of standard operating procedures for UN Country Teams.

Noting that the world has a unique, once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver a better future for all humanity, she stressed: "The task ahead is challenging, but nothing is impossible when we work together."

Opening the segment, ECOSOC Vice-President Cristián Barros said the Council would contribute to the implementation of the QCPR in three ways: by laying the foundation for its work after the receipt of comprehensive proposals requested from the Secretary-General in the QCPR; by discussing concrete steps that the UN development system can initiate immediately to enhance system-wide coherence and efficiency; by reflecting on adjustments needed to improve impact of support provided to different groups of countries to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

As a result of the deliberations in the general Assembly on the QCPR, Mr. Barros said there is now growing recognition among Member States that the UN development system is at a "critical juncture" where important decisions will need to be made for the Organization to effectively support delivery of the 2030 Agenda.

This is why the new QCPR resolution of the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to prepare proposals for their consideration in the course of this year on the system's functions and capacities.

"These options will enable Member States to make decisions on the changes required at different levels for the kind of transformation we need to bring the UN development system up to speed with the level of ambition of the 2030 Agenda," he said.