

UN rights chief 'alarmed' by upsurge in attacks against civilians in Syria's Idlib

Civilians in Syria's north-western city of Idlib continue to be used "as pawns", caught in the crossfire of bombardments by the Government and its allies, and attacks by non-State armed groups, the United Nations human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet, warned on Tuesday.

Since December, the intensified ground-based bombardment of the city, located in the north-west of the country, coupled with a series of attacks by non-State actors, has led to numerous civilian casualties and left close to a million people, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in an extremely vulnerable situation, her [statement](#) explained.

"Large numbers of civilians, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in Idlib and northern Aleppo are living an intolerable existence," said Ms. Bachelet.

"They are trapped between the escalation of hostilities and bombardment on the one hand, and, on the other, are forced to live under the extremist rule of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and other extremist fighters who regularly carry out targeted killings, abductions and arbitrary detention."

The High Commissioner called on "all parties involved, as well as external governments with influence, to ensure that the protection of civilians is held paramount in the planning and execution of all military operations in accordance with international law".

Idlib and areas of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates, are part of a "demilitarized buffer zone" but, for over two months, violence has escalated again, including an increase of infighting amongst non-State actors and in the use of improvised explosive devices in areas they control, including by the extremist group, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.

While the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](#)) notes that a comprehensive count of civilian casualties has not been possible, some of the most recent incidents include: 11 civilians killed and nine injured on 29 January following a ground-based bombardment in a residential and market area; 11 civilians killed by shelling in different areas on 12 February; at least nine killed and nine injured on 15 and 16 February in Khan Shaykun in southern Idlib; 16 civilians killed and more than 70 injured on Monday by two explosive devices in the Qusour neighbourhood of Idlib.

The list of fatalities includes a high number of women and children.

"I urge all the parties involved to, first and foremost, ensure that civilians themselves, and civilian infrastructure, are protected as required

by international humanitarian and international human rights law," the High Commissioner said.

"The principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution must be fully respected, and military objects must not be placed in the vicinity of civilians," she added.

Ms. Bachelet also expressed concern about the well-being of some 20,000 people who fled ISIL-controlled areas in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate in recent weeks and are now being held in makeshift camps for displaced persons run by Kurdish armed groups.

According to OHCHR, these include the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are reported to be preventing IDPs from leaving the camps in what appears to amount to deprivation of liberty.

She added she remains "particularly concerned" about the situation of some 200 families, including many women and children, who are reportedly trapped in the tiny area still under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and are apparently being actively prevented from leaving by ISIL.

The UN rights chief said they "continue to be subjected to intensified air and ground-based strikes by the US-led coalition forces and their SDF allies on the ground".

"Civilians continue to be used as pawns by the various parties," Ms. Bachelet lamented, calling on responsible parties "to provide safe passage to those who wish to flee, while those who wish to remain must also be protected as much as possible".

"They should not be sacrificed to ideology on the one hand, or military expediency on the other. If protecting civilian lives means taking a few more days to capture the last fraction of land controlled by ISIL, then so be it," she stated.