

Human Rights Council holds urgent debate on Human Rights and humanitarian situation in Syria

Human Rights Council
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The Human Rights Council today held an urgent debate on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Syria.

Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, President of the United Nations General Assembly, said the report on Syria published by the Commission of Inquiry provided a dire image of the situation on the ground. The Syrian Government had manifestly failed in its duty to protect its people. Its forces had committed gross human rights violations. He supported the appointment of Kofi Annan as a Special Envoy to Syria and commended his efforts to engage with those involved.

Navi Pillay United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that since she had briefed the General Assembly on the human rights situation in Syria, her Office had received disturbing reports of a rapidly deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation. The High Commissioner called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to end the fighting and bombardments and called upon the Syrian authorities to cooperate fully with international mechanisms, including Mr. Kofi Annan, joint Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and the League of Arab States to Syria, and allow an Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights field presence in Syria.

Speaking as the concerned country, Syria condemned the holding of the meeting and said that it was an effort to politicize the High-level Segment of the Human Rights Council. The Council was not an appropriate forum for such matters. The world had recently seen serious distorting of humanitarian intervention and civilian protection; some countries used those concepts to change regimes and destroy the infrastructure of targeted States. The call for the holding of this meeting was part of a pre-established plan to attack Syria under the pretext of addressing humanitarian needs.

In the debate, speakers said the Syrian Government was responsible for protecting its population and President Assad should step aside to allow for a peaceful political transition. The Council needed to call for an immediate end to the violence, stress the responsibility of Syria to protect its population and continue to closely monitor the situation. The Syrian Government had to take all measures possible to stop human rights violations and establish a commission to investigate these violations. Humanitarian corridors needed to be opened. Nations must demonstrate today that the world stood united with the people of Syria, for they represented their country's future, just as Assad and his murderous cohort represented its past. Systematic and gross violations of human rights were being committed in Syria on a daily basis by Government forces and those might amount to crimes against humanity.

Other speakers were concerned about appeals for regime change in Syria and of those who advocated the use of force and violence to resolve the conflict. They rejected any attempt to undermine Syria's sovereignty and territorial independence and demanded full respect for the principles of self-determination and sovereignty of this Arab nation. The leadership of Syria was a matter for the Syrian people to decide. Political dialogue should be built upon the political reforms already announced. The debate should be guided by prudence and cooperation rather than strategic expediency. Speakers said they did not approve of armed intervention or the imposition of so-called regime change in Syria. They appreciated the efforts of countries in the region to establish a peaceful resolution. Discussions in the Council should be constructive and conducive to a peaceful solution. Speakers rejected any attempt at foreign military intervention and welcomed and supported the efforts made by Mr. Kofi Annan. A solution to the crisis should incorporate three elements: a democratic approach based on the self-determination of people, absolute respect for human rights, and a respect of the sovereignty of Syria.

Speaking in the urgent debate were Norway on behalf of the Nordic Group, Portugal on behalf of the European Union, Mauritania on behalf of the Arab Group, Italy, United States, Spain, Hungary, Switzerland, Russian Federation, Uruguay, Saudi Arabia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Guatemala, Qatar, Cuba, Peru, Kuwait, India, Indonesia, China, Austria, Czech Republic, Thailand, Ecuador, Angola, Belgium, Libya, Jordan, Botswana, Chile, Poland, Nigeria, Romania, Maldives, France, Ireland, Egypt, Venezuela, Bulgaria, Turkey, Morocco, and Honduras.

The Council suspended its urgent debate at 2:40 p.m. to resume its High-level Debate. It will resume its urgent debate around 5:30 p.m. today and will continue until 7 p.m.

Opening Remarks

NASSIR ABDULAZIZ AL-NASSER, President of the United Nations General Assembly, said this was a crucial moment for Syria. The report on Syria published by the Commission of Inquiry provided a dire image of the situation on the ground. The Syrian Government had manifestly failed in its duty to protect its people. Its forces had committed gross human rights violations. The lack of medical supplies was also of serious concern. The use of rockets and other munitions against Syrians was grave. The Syrian authorities had to immediately end the killings and halt the human rights violations. All parties had to stop all violence and reprisals in accordance with the Arab League resolutions and as endorsed by the General Assembly. The active role of the Human Rights Council and the High Commissioner were highly commendable. The three resolutions adopted by the Council and the three special sessions it held were important for holding the attention of the international community. The current urgent debate would continue to put the spotlight on the situation. Many countries regretted the failure of the United Nations Security Council to adopt a resolution in support of the Arab League measure. The United Nations General Assembly had adopted a resolution in support of the Arab League measure condemning the human rights violations in Syria. The President supported the appointment of Kofi Annan as a Special Envoy to Syria and commended his efforts to engage with those involved.

NAVI PILLAY, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that since she briefed the General Assembly on the human rights situation in Syria, her Office had received disturbing reports of a rapidly deteriorating human rights and humanitarian situation. Syrian military and security forces had launched massive campaigns of arrest, arbitrarily detaining thousands of protestors, as well as activists and others suspected of anti-Government activities. The High Commissioner was particularly appalled by the recent escalation of violence in the country, especially blockades of cities including Homs and Hama. During the blockades, residents were unable to obtain water, food and medical supplies. The blockades often made it impossible to get the injured to hospitals. Children had not been spared, and some reports suggested that more than 500 had been killed since March 2011, and as many as 80 children killed in January 2012. The Syrian army had reportedly used tanks, mortars, rockets and artillery to cordon off cities, and shelled densely populated neighbourhoods in what appeared to be an indiscriminate attack on civilian areas. Hundreds of people had reportedly been killed since the start of the latest assault at the beginning of February 2012. The High Commissioner called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire to end the fighting and bombardments.

The Syrian Government had provided the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights with its own figures of 2,493 civilians and 1,345 soldiers and police officers killed between 15 March 2011 and 18 January 2012 (a total of 3,838 casualties). The actual numbers of casualties may far exceed those figures. While the protests had remained largely peaceful, reports of armed attacks by anti-government fighters against Syrian forces had increased, also with further consequences on civilians. The International Commission of Inquiry report, published on 22 February, concluded that the human rights situation had deteriorated significantly since November 2011. The League of Arab States had responded to the events in Syria, and its efforts must be supported. The Government of Syria maintained that it had cooperated with the League to the fullest extent possible.

The High Commissioner called upon the Syrian authorities to cooperate fully with international mechanisms, including Mr. Kofi Annan, joint Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and the League of Arab States to Syria, and allow an Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights field presence in Syria. The Government of Syria must allow independent international monitors to visit all places of detention, grant unhindered access to humanitarian actors and release all political prisoners. The Government of Syria had cooperated to some extent, such as the access provided to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League of Arab States observer mission to prisons and detention facilities, as well as the release of thousands of individuals who were detained. However, the High Commissioner said, those steps paled into insignificance in the face of the continued onslaught of violence and arrest against people by State actors. In the face of the unspeakable violations taking place every moment, the High Commissioner recommended referring the situation of Syria to the International Criminal Court. What was urgently needed today was for the killings to stop. For that to happen the international community must unite in sending a clear message to the Syrian authorities and the Security Council must assume its responsibility to protect.

Statement by Syria as the Concerned Country

FAYSAL KHABBAZ HAMOUI (Syria), speaking as the concerned country, condemned the holding of the meeting and said that it was an effort to politicize the High-level Segment of the Human Rights Council. The Council was not an appropriate forum for such matters and the real aim behind the holding of this meeting was a cover up of the murder of innocent civilians by armed groups. Syria did not pretend that the human rights situation in the country was perfect and was aware of the regression in the quality of services provided to citizens, which was due to armed groups using inhabited areas as their bases. Unjust unilateral sanctions imposed by some countries on Syrian people impeded access to health, medications, and electricity and other goods and services. In spite of the above, none of the international organizations had issued an appeal with regard to the human rights situation in Syria and none of the Special Rapporteurs on humanitarian matters had voiced any urgent appeal on the situation.

The world had recently seen serious distorting of humanitarian intervention and civilian protection; some countries used those concepts to change regimes and destroy the infrastructure of targeted States. The call for holding of the meeting was part of a pre-established plan to attack Syria under the pretext of addressing humanitarian needs. The simplest and most effective step to take to help the people in Syria was to stop inciting sectarianism, stop mediatisation and stop providing arms and weapons and putting Syrian people against each other. Since the Human Rights Council was determined to violate its own mandate and rules of procedures and considering that the real aim of holding the meeting was to fuel terrorism and fuel the crisis in the country, and considering the manipulation of the concept of civilian protection, Syria declared its withdrawal from this sterile discussion and from any prejudiced resolution it might adopt.

Debate

Norway, speaking on behalf of the Nordic Group, said the Syrian Government had the responsibility to protect its population. President Assad should step aside to allow for a peaceful political transition. The Nordic Group condemned the indiscriminate use of force. It was imperative that the international community redoubled its efforts to find a broad and inclusive approach for a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis. All members of the United Nations Security Council had to assume their responsibility. The Nordic Group welcomed the Arab League's plan for a peaceful, Syrian-led transition.

Portugal, speaking on behalf of the European Union, welcomed the resolution on Syria adopted by an overwhelming majority in the General Assembly, which condemned the Syrian regime's activities. The European Union repeated its call for President Assad to end immediately the killing of civilians, withdraw the Syrian army from besieged towns and step aside. The European Union recalled its support to the League of Arab States' efforts to end the violence and welcomed the first meeting of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People. The Council needed to call for an immediate end to the violence, stress the responsibility of Syria to protect its population and continue to closely monitor the situation.

Mauritania, speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, said the Syrian Government had to take all measures possible to stop human rights violations and establish a commission to investigate these violations. The Arab Group noted with great sorrow the impasse in Syria and the ongoing humanitarian situation. Humanitarian corridors needed to be opened. The Arab Group reaffirmed its commitment to securing a peaceful solution, which ensured the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. The Arab Group welcomed the positive response of the Secretary-General to appoint a joint Arab League-United Nations envoy, Kofi Annan.

Italy said as a co-sponsor of the resolution, they called on the Syrian authorities to immediately stop the unacceptable repression. The bloodshed must end now. Prevailing impunity was no longer tolerable. Italy fully supported the Arab League plan and welcomed appointment of Kofi Annan as United Nations and Arab League Joint Special Envoy.

United States demanded an end to the Assad Government's outrageous crimes against the people of Syria, withdrawal of all security forces, and immediate humanitarian access. Although 13 members of the Security Council supported steps taken by the international community, indefensible vetoes by two permanent members gave Assad cover to accelerate his war on the Syrian people. Bashar al-Assad must go. Nations must demonstrate today that the world stood united with the people of Syria, for they represented their country's future, just as Assad and his murderous cohort represented its past.

Spain said Spain was very concerned about the report of the Commission of Inquiry, which showed widespread and systematic human rights violations that could constitute crimes against humanity. Spain supported the initiatives of the Arab League and the Group of Friends of Syria. The international community must scale up its demands on the Syrian authorities, particularly to allow humanitarian access. Spain would co-sponsor the resolution on the situation in Syria.

Hungary said that systematic and gross violations of human rights were being committed in Syria on a daily basis by Government forces and those might amount to crime against humanity. Hungary was particularly concerned by the death of journalists and violations of children's rights by the authorities. Ending the violence in this country was an urgent priority and Hungary hoped that the Council would be able to address the serious humanitarian and human rights situation in Syria.

Switzerland said that 500,000 persons in Syria were caught up in war zones without access to emergency health care. Switzerland called on the Syrian Government to ensure immediate access to humanitarian organizations. Switzerland said that the crisis should not divert efforts from finding a solution to the political crisis in Syria.

Russian Federation said that the politicization of the situation in Syria would not facilitate the resolution of the crisis. The Russian Federation was convinced that only Syrians themselves could find the solution and overcome the crisis.

Uruguay said Uruguay had co-sponsored the request for the urgent debate taking place and expressed concern about the situation in Syria. There was nothing more contemptible than shooting at one's own people. Uruguay deplored the refusal of the Syrian Government to implement the recommendations of the Human Rights Council and cooperate with the Commission of Inquiry. The gross human rights violations were likely to constitute crimes against humanity.

Saudi Arabia said Saudi Arabia continued to support the Syrian people faced with a grave humanitarian disaster which had led to tens of thousands of casualties. Saudi Arabia asserted that any act of the international community had to be based on consensus, but the lack of consensus had provided time for more civilians to be killed. Saudi Arabia called on the concerned international actors to change their standpoint; they were ignoring those dying in Syria. Saudi Arabia would be at the forefront of all efforts to find solutions to ensure that the Syrian people were protected from systematic crimes.

Costa Rica expressed its indignation of the widespread human rights violations in Syria. Costa Rica appealed to the Syrian Government to be consistent with their commitments under international law. The Syrian Government had failed in its responsibility to protect its population. The Human Rights Council had to say loud and clear that human rights violations were not the prerogative of countries, particularly when they constituted crimes against humanity. Geopolitical provisions should not prevail over the need to protect the population.

Mexico said Mexico supported the Arab League actions and welcomed the recent General Assembly resolution on Syria. Mexico lamented the lack of cooperation of the Syrian Government with the Human Rights Council. The principle of non-interference could not be invoked when serious violations, which could be described as crimes against humanity, were being perpetrated.

Guatemala deeply deplored the loss of human lives among the Syrian population and supported the united message of the General Assembly resolution. The Council was closely following the developing crisis and it was clear that the situation in the field was worsening fast. All parties must make a last effort to end the crisis, as in the Arab League plan. If that failed, and the violence increased, the Council must review its modus operandi.

Qatar said Qatar had spared no effort to end the crisis since its outbreak. Unfortunately the Syrian regime did not listen to the voices of reason, only to the sound of gunfire. Killing and torture of innocent civilians, including elders, women and children, enforced disappearances and sexual assault were flagrant violations of all international laws, and may amount to crimes against humanity. The Syrian regime must open humanitarian corridors and immediately cease hostilities.

Cuba said Cuba was concerned at the loss of innocent lives anywhere but rejected attempts to attribute responsibility for all of the violence to the Syrian regime. Cuba was concerned at appeals for regime change in Syria and of those who advocated the use of force and violence to resolve the conflict. Cuba rejected any attempt to undermine Syria's sovereignty and territorial independence and demanded full respect for the principles of self-determination and sovereignty of this Arab nation.

Peru said that the Human Rights Council could not remain passive in face of the current state of violence against Syrian citizens and appealed for the immediate cessation of all violence. The appointment of Kofi Annan as the United Nations-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria would help to resolve the crisis. An inclusive dialogue with the active participation of the Syrian people was the only way to bring about an end to the conflict. Peru agreed that sanctions would harm the most vulnerable in Syrian society and stressed that a human rights component should be included in any visit that would be made to the country.

Kuwait said the most serious elements in the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria were credible and consistent evidence identifying high- and mid-ranking members of the armed forces who ordered their subordinates to shoot at unarmed protestors and to attack civilian neighbourhoods with indiscriminate tank and machine gun fire. Kuwait confirmed its strong commitment to Syria's sovereignty and independence and stressed the importance of exerting every effort to reach a peaceful solution based on the Arab plan.

India said instability and unrest in Syria had implications for peace and stability in the Middle East. India condemned all violence and human rights violations. A political process for resolution of the crisis should be led by the Syrians themselves. The leadership of Syria was a matter for the Syrian people to decide. Political dialogue should be built upon the political reforms already announced. The debate should be guided by prudence and cooperation rather than strategic expediency.

Indonesia said the continued acts of violence in Syria had to stop and stop now. The meaningful political transformation towards democracy, as strongly desired by the Syrian people, could never start if the Government of Syria failed to listen to the voices of its own people. Indonesia supported the international community's engagement in finding solutions to the crisis in Syria, which should be conducted through diplomatic channels, not through military actions.

China said China was deeply concerned about the continued escalation of the crisis in Syria. The factions should express themselves in a non-violent manner. An inclusive political dialogue was required, as was comprehensive reform. China did not approve of armed intervention or the imposition of so-called regime change in Syria. China appreciated the efforts of countries in the region to establish a peaceful resolution. Discussions in the Council should be constructive and conducive to a peaceful solution.

Austria said that the widespread, systematic and gross human rights violations in Syria amounted to crimes against humanity. Austria urged the Security Council to take action and to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court. Austria called on the Syrian authorities to allow humanitarian organizations access to hospitals and prisons.

Czech Republic appreciated the Human Rights Council today adding its voice to international calls for the immediate cessation of violence in Syria, especially when the most competent United Nations body, the Security Council, repeatedly failed to do so. Eleven months of hostilities had created a dire humanitarian situation; access must be granted to humanitarian agencies to deliver vital aid to civilians affected by the ruthless campaign of state repression.

Thailand called upon the Syrian Government to guarantee safe and immediate access of humanitarian assistance to the affected civilian population. Despite its respect for the independence and sovereignty of Syria, Thailand was deeply concerned about the gravity of the situation in the country. Thailand believed a Syrian-led inclusive political process was important, and was encouraged by recent positive steps taken by the Government of Syria.

Ecuador appealed for both the Syrian authorities and warring parties to put an immediate end to the violence. Ecuador rejected any attempt at foreign military intervention and welcomed and supported the efforts made by Mr. Kofi Annan. A solution to the crisis should incorporate three elements: a democratic approach based on the self-determination of people, absolute respect for human rights, and respect of the sovereignty of Syria.

Angola said that the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria constituted a good basis to reach a negotiable solution. Angola welcomed the appointment of Mr. Kofi Annan as joint Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General and the Arab League. The Human Rights Council should support efforts for dialogue in Syria. Angola stressed that there should be a stop to all human rights violations.

Belgium said Belgium was disappointed that the Syrian Government had neglected its obligations under numerous international conventions. Grave human rights violations had been committed against innocent civilians including women and children. Belgium urged the Syrian authorities to engage in constructive dialogue with the international community and to show a real openness to the proposals put forth by the United Nations and the Arab League.

Libya sent a message to the Syrian people to not lose hope or spirit, as victory was at hand. The number of martyrs grew daily, including women and children. Libya supported the work of the Arab League and the convening of the urgent debate at the Human Rights Council. Libya was one of the first countries to recognize the Syrian National Council and supported the development of a resolution on the matter at the Council.

Jordan condemned the use of violence against civilians. Jordan supported the resolutions passed by the Council and the Arab League Plan of Action. Jordan called on the Syrian Government to engage positively with the international community, for it was the way to come out of the crisis. The political and diplomatic solution was the best way out of the situation. Any military intervention would result in untold consequences for Syria but also for the region. The Syrian authorities had to resort to reform.

Botswana said it was clearly evident that Assad had failed to lead a democratic transition. Botswana welcomed the Arab League's call for a democratic transition as well as the recently convened meeting in Tunisia and the appointment of Kofi Annan as a Special Envoy. Botswana expressed disappointment at the exercise of the veto in the Security Council, which had prevented the maintenance of peace and security. Botswana pleaded with China and Russia to change their position and support the imposition of sanctions and the pursuit of a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Chile said Chile fully supported the Arab League and condemned the killings, arbitrary detentions, torture and sexual violence, including sexual violence against children in Syria. The situation must be referred to the International Criminal Court. Chile urgently appealed to the Syrian authorities to end the violence and objected to the use of tanks, mortar bombs, shells and artillery to attack civilians, particularly in Homs.

Poland urged free and unimpeded access by the United Nations and humanitarian agencies, including to Homs, and appealed for full cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross in assuring evacuation of injured and deceased persons from affected areas. Poland called on the Security Council to fulfil its responsibilities and effectively address the situation in Syria.

Nigeria called on the Syrian authorities to stop their brutal attacks on defenceless people. The indiscriminate, relentless and widespread shelling of civilian residential areas by the Syrian army was particularly repugnant. Nigeria noted attacks on Government forces by armed groups and called on them to desist, in order to avoid further escalation of the crisis. Both sides should enter into immediate negotiations to chart a new democratic path for Syria.

Romania called for an immediate and complete end of all hostilities and acts of violence in Syria. Romania was concerned

about the humanitarian situation in the country and hoped that United Nations and humanitarian agencies would be allowed to make a full assessment of the humanitarian needs so that the international community could provide meaningful assistance. All international actors should cooperate with Mr. Kofi Annan as the United Nations-Arab League Special Envoy for Syria.

Maldives said that the humanitarian crisis in Syria was a direct result of the gross and systematic violations being perpetrated by the Government of President Bashar al Assad. The Human Rights Council must send a clear message to the United Nations Security Council that crimes against humanity continued to be perpetrated in Syria and that it was time for the world to intervene.

France said that it was the duty of the Human Rights Council to express its condemnation of the crimes against humanity committed in Syria. The Syrian State had for three weeks bombed the city of Homs. Violence should cease immediately in Homs, Deraa and Zabadani and unimpeded access must be granted to humanitarian organizations to provide aid for the population. The text submitted to the Council reflected the urgency of the situation and the concern of the international community and France urged all Member States to support it.

Ireland said that the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria was a catalogue of crimes and added that the Human Rights Council had a special role to play in ensuring that all human rights violations were properly investigated. The Syrian regime must end the violent repression it was inflicting on its own people.

Egypt condemned the escalation of violence and called on the Syrian Government to listen to the aspiration of its people and end the violence. Military oppression was not a proper response to democratic aspirations. The end of the predicament must be based on full respect for the resolutions of the Arab League and the international solution must be complementary to the Arab plan and respect the territorial integrity of Syria.

Venezuela said that Venezuela had called on the peace loving nations to respect the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people who were exercising their right to peaceful expression, which had nothing to do with the armed groups that were operating on the margins of the law. It was unacceptable to justify foreign military aggression with the need to protect civilians.

Bulgaria said the Commission of Inquiry had clearly found that crimes against humanity had been committed in Syria. President Assad had lost all legitimacy, both domestically and internationally, and should step down and give way to reforms. Humanitarian organizations should be allowed full access. Bulgaria offered to host a meeting of representatives of the United Nations, Arab League, European Union and all parties interested in helping Syria.

Turkey said it was tragic that once again the Human Rights Council was addressing the situation in Syria. The violence kept escalating, and the images on television showed the gradual transformation of that beautiful country into a slaughterhouse. Valerie Amos of Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs must be allowed to visit Syria, but humanitarian work should not be politicized. The human rights crisis threatened peace and security in a troubled and problematic region. A man-made disaster was emerging in Syria, and Turkey called for a specific resolution to be passed, which would help the Syrian Government come to grips with reality. The authorities must not avoid accountability.

Morocco expressed its sorrow for all the human loss in Syria, and reaffirmed the necessity for the urgent debate as part of solidarity with the people in Syria. The violence and bloodshed must end. Morocco called on the Syrian Government to cooperate with the Arab League's plan of action, which respected the sovereignty of Syria.

Honduras agreed that the international community must take effective and urgent actions to protect the civilian population in Syria. Honduras welcomed the appointment of Mr. Kofi Annan as the Special Envoy for Syria. All persons arrested and detained arbitrarily should be released and human rights defenders should be protected. A regional approach was the best way to provide a solution to the crisis.

For use of the information media; not an official record