

UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Urgent steps needed to prevent outright catastrophe in north-western Syria

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NEW YORK (9 May 2018) – The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic noted with grave concern the recent spike in hostilities throughout north-western Syria, warning any further escalation would invariably result in a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe.

“We received reports of numerous attacks by pro-Government forces against civilian areas, causing high numbers of casualties including of women and children,” said Commission Chair Paulo Pinheiro. “Civilian infrastructure including numerous educational and medical facilities in the northern Hama and southern Idlib axis have been damaged or destroyed by both aerial and ground offensives, and a number of institutions have been closed down in anticipation of further attacks, leaving thousands without access to health or education,” he added.

Sources on the ground reported to the Commission the incessant nature of airstrikes over recent weeks, as well as the lack of safe shelters. Since 29 April alone, more than 152,000 individuals have been internally displaced in the northwest, bringing the total number who have fled to over 290,000 over the past three months.

Over the last year, the Commission has repeatedly sounded the alarm bell and emphasized that a military offensive to retake Idlib would trigger mass displacement and gravely affect the lives, livelihoods and basic human rights of up to three million civilians subsisting in north-western Syria, including those residing in northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates.

While the Commission’s investigations are on-going, it is clear all parties continue to employ tactics that violate basic principles of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. The Commission calls on all parties and particularly the Astana guarantors to maintain and abide by the demilitarization agreement until a negotiated settlement prioritizing the protection of civilians is reached in good faith, and re-emphasise that any further military offensives in the demilitarized zone will trigger a humanitarian disaster.

As hostilities in the northwest persist, the Commission continues to gather first-hand information and investigate all alleged violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, regardless of perpetrator and in accordance with its mandate.

Background

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which comprises Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (Chair), Ms. Karen Koning AbuZayd, and Mr. Hanny Megally has been mandated by the United Nations Human Rights Council to investigate and record all violations of international law since March 2011 in the Syrian Arab Republic. Its reports can be found on the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic's [webpage](#) and [Twitter](#) page.

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