

Press Statement on presentation of oral report to the Human Rights Council by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

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Good afternoon. Today the Commission of Inquiry has briefed the Human Rights Council for the 24th time since our creation in September 2011.

Our briefing and interactive dialogue are ongoing, but we wanted to take this opportunity to address the media, especially since we were traveling and did not have an opportunity to do so last week. The focus of our comments to the Council today pertained to a paper we published on 20 June summarizing our comprehensive and independent inquiry on the situation in eastern Ghouta. We documented violations perpetrated by all parties during the terminal phase of that siege, the longest running siege in modern history, and its aftermath.

The battle for control over eastern Ghouta was, truly, the weaponization of human misery. Systematic and strategic use of military forces to encircle, starve and, ultimately, compel surrender, amounted to crimes against humanity.

Armed groups and terrorist organisations indiscriminately shelled civilian inhabited areas in Damascus. Such actions constitute war crimes.

Thousands of survivors were forced to leave their homes and now face an uncertain future.

While the situation in eastern Ghouta changed swiftly this year, the tragedy for civilians occurred in slow motion over five years. This was a situation that was foreseeable and preventable. Sieges throughout the Syrian Arab Republic have been regularly used as a form of collective punishment – intentionally laid to erode the viability of civilian life, to turn the besieged civilian population against the warring party “governing” them, to compel surrender, and forcibly to displace civilians.

For seven years, the warring strategies employed by all parties to the conflict have been untethered to any sense of ethics. There are too many parties and powerful states with competing agendas providing military support, none of which prioritise the needs of victims for whom they purport to be fighting.

The mentality of many Syrian people has slowly also changed into a conflict mentality. Once tolerant societies are now gone, civility has been lost. Those with guns have the power, and the cruel control.

Sadly, use of siege warfare is seen by the warring parties as a success story. These tactics have been employed by both pro-Government forces and armed groups, and they may continue to be used in other areas. Dara'a and Idlib may be next.

We are happy to take your questions.

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