

Press conference opening remarks by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

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Our latest report covers the period **January-July 2020**, which saw a relative reduction in largescale hostilities and indiscriminate attacks, with the 5 March ceasefire in Idlib largely holding. However, Syrians continue to be killed, on a daily basis, and to suffer gross human rights violations at the hands of all actors controlling territory in Syria. While well documented violations - such as arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture and deaths in custody - continue to be utilized by these actors, newer forms of violations including targeted killings, looting and appropriation of property are increasing in numbers and carry sectarian undertones.

Across **Government-held areas**, we documented 45 cases of enforced disappearance, 13 cases of torture, and 19 deaths in detention. Continuing to repress people by placing them in incommunicado detention in abhorrent conditions and torturing them, amounts to crimes against humanity

In **areas formerly under the control of non-state armed and terrorist groups**, Government's security apparatus continue to violate residents' civil, economic, political and social rights. Checkpoints block residents from making a living by selling goods or crops elsewhere, and even from seeking health care. An opaque "security marks" system prevents people from owning or even renting a home. The constant threat of arbitrary detention stifles freedom of movement. Humanitarian organizations are prevented from bringing in critical aid. Barriers to the return of refugees are omnipresent.

The suffering of the Syrian population is further compounded by the deepening economic crisis, tightening sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. With a staggering **9,3 million Syrians now food insecure**, we reiterate the need to ease or waive sectoral sanctions to ensure access to food, essential health supplies, and COVID-19 medical support and to avoid further immiserating an already desperate population.

Sadly, the suffering of the Syrian people does not rest with the government of Syria only. In **Afrin, Ras al Ayn and the surrounding areas** the Turkey-backed "Syrian National Army" (SNA) may have committed the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment and torture, and rape. Attacks by massive IEDs and shelling claimed scores of lives. Looting and property confiscation by the SNA in mainly Kurdish areas is rife. Whole communities and cultures are under attack. UNESCO heritage sites have been bulldozed and looted. Turkey should take action to prevent these abuses, and ensure the protection of civilians in the areas under its control.

It is encouraging that the 5 March ceasefire negotiated by the Russian Federation and Turkey in **Idlib and surrounding areas** is largely holding, but of the nearly one million people who fled indiscriminate bombardments earlier this year, most remain in miserable displacement camps in northern Idlib. Some 200,000 have returned to live amidst the rubble in areas that remain under the control of the terrorist group Hayat Tahrir el Sham (HTS). People who expressed dissent against HTS were detained, tortured and even murdered. Increasing numbers of women and girls are suffering forced and early marriages, sexual violence, miscarriages and domestic violence in the overcrowded camps, indicative of heightened desperation, as winter nears and COVID-19 spreads.

Meanwhile in **Dayr al-Zawr, Raqqa and Hasakah**, ISIL continued its attacks on the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF) and the anti-ISIL coalition. Eighteen months since ISIL lost its bastion in Baghouz, over 60,000 women and children remain in the Al Hol Camp and its annex, in appalling conditions. With COVID-19's recent spread in the camp, only five primary health clinics remain open to service those in the camp.

Nearly 35,000 are children under the age of 12. To hold so many **young children in inhumane conditions** for 18 months, without any legal recourse, is not only unlawful but also shameful. They should be released, and we call on Member States to urgently take back their own citizens, in particular children with their mothers.

Friends, COVID-19 is now rapidly spreading across Syria, with numbers much higher than officially admitted. To avoid a catastrophe **urgent action must be taken** to empty prisons or drastically reduce overcrowding. The Government of Syria and all parties in the conflict must immediately release all arbitrarily detained prisoners, as well as children, the sick and the elderly.

Thank you.