

Statement by Mr. Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

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M. le Président

Excellencies,

The Syrian conflict will soon enter its seventh year. I repeat, its seventh year. After six years of the most brutal violence in recent history, there is no Syrian man, woman or child without a story of loss to share. Lost parents, lost children, lost homes, lost hope. Many have lost all of the above.

Since its establishment, it has been the Commission's mission and goal to give voice to the millions of victims of this conflict, some of whom you have heard from this morning. These stories convey to the Council and to the international community at large that behind every story of destruction and deprivation, there lies a face and a name. And that – as the years go by – their stories will not be forgotten.

Most fresh in our minds are the images of horror which emanated from the battle for Aleppo. For months on end, daily airstrikes pounded eastern Aleppo city, steadily destroying all of the essentials of civilian life: bakeries, water stations, hospitals, schools, mosques. Not even orphanages escaped the wrath of the violence unleashed upon eastern Aleppo. Hundreds of civilians – so many that dozens still remain unaccounted for – lost their lives in the bombardments. Others perished due to the lack of even the most basic health-care services.

In the end, the Government's siege tactics proved repulsively successful: eastern Aleppo is reduced to rubble, while survivors have been forced to leave their homes and face an uncertain future elsewhere. The very few who were able to return found their houses looted. Reports of arrests and enforced disappearances continue to emerge. Fears of going through the same atrocious ordeal as the one faced by civilians in Aleppo now haunt Syrians all across the country, many of whom are unable to find the briefest respite from the bombing.

In western Aleppo city, civilians were terrorised under a near daily barrage of attacks, including the use of improvised mortars and rockets. Often homemade, these crude weapons are so inaccurate that those operating them are unable to use them in a manner that distinguishes between civilians and military objectives. And yet, armed groups continued to fire them, indiscriminately striking homes, schools, and busy streets, in attacks which claimed the lives of countless men, women and children.

The recapture of Aleppo city should not deceive the warring parties into believing that a military solution is possible. Six years of war and indescribable loss prove them wrong. The scale of the violations across Syria by all parties that we have documented over the past six months show that the trends of Aleppo bore out in other parts of the country, proving that the possibility of military victory is entirely mistaken.

There is only one way to end this conflict and stop the suffering of Syrian men, women and children. And that is for the parties to come to the table and engage in genuine and constructive political dialogue. In this context, the Astana talks have produced encouraging results as both key influential actors and warring parties have met to consolidate an agreed nationwide ceasefire. At the same time, the latest round of Geneva discussions have primarily focused on finding ways to effectively implement Security Council resolution 2254. Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura will continue to mediate these talks in Geneva later this month and his efforts deserve the full support of members of this Council.

For political dialogue to have a chance of success, Member States must exert their influence over warring parties and acknowledge that they too have a role in this war. This increasingly complex conflict is partially fuelled by the involvement of external actors and the financial, materiel, and other support they lend to the warring parties. We urge all Member States to employ the same sense of unity with which they are combatting terrorist groups in Syria to use their leverage over parties to protect the rights of the civilian population for whom they purport to be fighting.

As the political process continues, it is essential that human rights and accountability issues remain key priorities at the negotiation table. Time and again, victims have told us that, without justice, they will never be able to live in peace in their country.

Perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held to account. This is not negotiable.

A crucial step in this direction is General Assembly resolution 71/248 creating an International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

The Mechanism presents an opportunity to foster accountability and will assist in bringing further measures of justice to the survivors of this conflict. The establishment of the Mechanism is all the more relevant – given the lack of a Security Council referral to the ICC. While the Mechanism gets underway to prepare files for future criminal

proceedings, the Commission will continue the work of our complementary mandate by publicly updating the Council on all violations committed by all parties. In line with the General Assembly resolution, we will do our utmost to support the Mechanism by cooperating fully with a view towards maximising its chances of success.

It is also the duty and obligation of Member States to protect Syrians who have been forced to leave their homes to escape the violence. Forced to leave their country to escape the violence, leaving most of their possessions behind, more than six and half million Syrians now live as refugees.

Many have died attempting to flee. As we speak, others continue taking the risk of perilous journeys to ensure a brighter future for their children.

Around one million refugees are now living across Europe. It is essential that all transit and destination countries protect the rights and dignity of all individuals fleeing this horrific conflict.

Thank you.

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