Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Human Rights and Democracy report 2012 - Syria

2013-07-19

Country updates - country

Latest update: 31 December 2013

The last three months of 2013 saw the human rights situation in Syria deteriorate further. The death toll continues to rise while 2.3 million refugees have fled the country and 6.5 million have become internally displaced. The UN estimates that 9.3 million people are in need within Syria, an increase of 2.5 million over the last three months.

In response to the desperate nature of the situation, the UK has committed £500 million in humanitarian assistance, more than we have to any previous humanitarian crisis, making us the second largest bilateral donor. We have been encouraging international partners to contribute to the dire situation faced by so many Syrians this winter, and are working for the success of the Kuwait II pledging conference on 15 January, where we intend to make a further contribution. We also continue to push for the full implementation of the UN Security Council Presidential Statement of 2 October which called for free and un-fettered humanitarian access.

We continue to support the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) which, in December, published a report which made it clear that the regime's policy of enforced disappearances is widespread and coordinated enough to constitute a crime against humanity. Regime policy has included the deliberate targeting of medical personnel for the supposed crime of assisting opposition supporters, as well reprisals targeted at the families of those perceived as being 'disloyal'. The COI also notes that extreme rebel groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have arbitrarily detained civilians, actions that have been condemned by the National Coalition, which the UK recognises as the only legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay has accused President Assad of being personally responsible for war crimes committed by regime forces.

Although an end of 2013 deadline for the removal of the most dangerous chemicals relating to Syria's chemical weapons programme was not met, progress has been made towards disarming the regime of these weapons. However, recent weeks have seen sustained regime air attacks on civilian inhabited areas in Aleppo. The use of indiscriminate weapons, such as 'barrel bombs' dropped from Russian-made aircraft, has led to considerable numbers of civilian deaths and widespread suffering.

It is in the context of continuing war crimes and widespread suffering that we co-sponsored a UN General Assembly third committee resolution, adopted with overwhelming support on 19 November, which referred to the important role of international criminal justice in holding to account those responsible for brutal crimes. The UK has called for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court. We also continue to support preparations for the Geneva II process which we see as the best opportunity to bring about the political transition needed to bring peace to Syria.

Since April 2012 we have committed over £44 million in non-humanitarian support to the Syrian crisis. This has included training over 300 Syrian journalists and activists to help develop an independent Syrian media, as well as funding the training of activists in how to collect evidence of human rights abuses, including sexual violence, suitable for use in future criminal proceedings. We also support local councils in the delivery of basic services, support efforts to build dialogue between different communities and provide support to the moderate opposition.

Latest update: 30 September 2013

The human rights situation in Syria has continued to deteriorate in the period between July and September 2013. The conflict has reached devastating proportions: more than 100,000 Syrians have been killed, 6.8 million are in need inside Syria and over 5.8 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes, with over 2 million people fleeing to neighbouring countries. Nearly a third of the Syrian population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

In light of the deteriorating humanitarian situation, the UK announced a further £100 million of humanitarian assistance on 25 September to help get essentials such as food, water and medicine to Syrian people in dire need. This brings the UK’s total to half a billion pounds, the UK’s largest response to a single humanitarian crisis. This reflects the scale, despair and brutality of the situation.

We remain in full support of the UN Commission of Inquiry, who continue to gather evidence of human rights violations and abuses with the aim of bringing those responsible to account. Their latest report, published on 11 September, highlighted how civilians are continuing to suffer from the ongoing fighting. The report described crimes against humanity and war crimes being committed by the regime and its forces, and serious violations committed by extremist anti-regime armed groups. The report concluded that there is no military solution to the conflict, and that a political solution founded upon the tenets of the Geneva communiqué is the only path to peace.

Against this background, the UK welcomed the adoption by the UN Human Rights Council of a new resolution on 27 September, which condemned the use of chemical weapons, called

for the perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses to be held to account and demanded full access for the UN Commission of Inquiry and humanitarian workers. The resolution also condemned the use of chemical weapons and contained language on preventing sexual violence.

On the same day, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution on Syrian chemical weapons, ending a 17-month stalemate in the Security Council on Syria. The UK strongly supported this resolution, which is a welcome step towards our broad objective of achieving a political solution to end the crisis. We continue to work towards a second Geneva conference to bring all sides together. We are appalled by the chemical weapons attack in Damascus on 21 August, which led to the death of hundreds of civilians and wounded many more. All evidence points towards government responsibility for the attacks. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have consistently made clear that those responsible for the most serious international crimes in Syria should be held to account, and we believe the situation in Syria should be referred to the International Criminal Court.

Since April 2012, we have committed over £40.5 million in non-humanitarian assistance to address the Syria crisis. This includes support to the moderate opposition, local councils, human rights defenders and civil society. We have provided equipment to help protect these groups and enable them to provide security and services to the Syrian people; this equipment includes armoured vehicles, body armour, generators, communications equipment and training for human rights activists.

Latest update: 30 June 2013

In the period between April and June 2013, the human rights situation in Syria continued to deteriorate. Over 93,000 Syrians have died, more than 1.6 million are refugees and 4.25 million have been displaced within Syria due to the conflict.

We remain in full support of the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry, who continue to gather evidence of human rights violations and abuses with the aim of bringing all those responsible to account. Their latest report, published on 4 June highlighted the new levels of brutality evident in the conflict; including documented cases of the use of chemical agents, the systematic imposition of sieges, forcible displacement and sexual and gender based violence and abuse. The report notes that whilst anti-government armed groups have also committed war crimes, their violations and abuses did not reach the intensity and scale of those committed by government forces and affiliated militia.

The UK welcomed the UN Human Rights Council’s adoption of a new resolution on 14 June, which strongly condemned the intervention of all foreign combatants, including those fighting on behalf of the Syrian regime. It urged all parties to refrain from any actions which may contribute to an increase in the number of violations of human rights and international law.

The resolution stressed the need to follow up on the Commission of Inquiry's report and conduct a transparent and independent investigation into all violations of international law by all parties.

We also welcomed the UN Human Rights Council's previous resolution adopted on 28 May, centred upon the Syrian government's siege of Al-Qusayr. The resolution strongly condemned the violations of international law by Syrian authorities and government-affiliated militias, in particular the regime's use of ballistic missiles and other heavy weapons against the people of Al-Qusayr. The resolution demanded that the Syrian authorities allow free and unimpeded access by the UN and humanitarian agencies, and requested that the Commission of Inquiry urgently conducts a comprehensive inquiry into the events in Al-Qusayr. In a statement on 4 June, the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, reiterated the request, calling on Assad's forces to allow immediate humanitarian access to Al-Qusayr.

The UK remains committed to achieving a political solution to the crisis based on a vision for a united, inclusive and democratic Syria. As the Geneva Communiqué states, the public services must be preserved or restored. This includes the military forces and security services. However all governmental institutions and state offices must perform according to professional and human rights standards. We also condemn in the strongest possible terms all human rights violations and abuses in Syria, committed by anyone, including indiscriminate attacks on civilians. We call on all sides to respect international humanitarian and human rights laws, noting the particular responsibility of the Syrian authorities in this regard.

There are now 1.6 million refugees registered/in process in neighbouring countries, and nearly a third of the Syrian population is in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. The UK is doing all it can to help all those affected by the violence and is playing a leading role as a bilateral donor to the international humanitarian response. We have already contributed £173 million in humanitarian aid so far. This has provided food for over 132,000 people across Syria, clean drinking water for almost 1 million people and almost 300,000 medical consultations. As announced at the G8, the UK is now set to double its contribution, bringing our total support to £348 million, with over £100 million going to the UN appeals. The funding includes our ongoing humanitarian aid, as well as development assistance to Jordan and Lebanon, both of whom have seen a dramatic increase in the number of Syrian refugees in recent months.

The UK has also continued to provide support via non-lethal assistance, geared towards strengthening the moderate opposition, supporting civil society and helping to reduce the effects of regional spill over. This assistance includes training for human rights activists, communications equipment, body armour and water purification kits. This has brought the total of our non-lethal assistance to £30million.

Further Information

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country of concern - Syria

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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2012

in full

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