

Panel on children in Syria

 [ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx)

37th session of the Human Rights Council

Statement by the United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights

12 March 2018

Mr President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

The conflict in Syria is soon to enter its eighth year. A conflict that began with the denigration of a child. In 2011, in the midst of the Arab spring, **13 year old Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb** having been detained for a month by authorities, was returned to his family - his body brutalised, burnt, shot, his genitals severed.

Shocked by such treatment and detention of child, Hamza's tragic fate would become a rallying cry for thousands - a rallying cry then brutally suppressed causing suffering for the Syrian people that over subsequent years has only expanded, deepened, and spread beyond their worst fears.

The conflict has reportedly killed **400,000 people; injured** more than **a million**. And today's catastrophic humanitarian situation underscores once more the failure of the international community to protect civilians, most notably children.

Excellencies,

This heinous, shameful, yet preventable conflict has not only denied millions of children their fundamental human rights, it has robbed them **of their very childhood**.

7 year old Bana al-Abed had no knowledge of a country at peace, when she tweeted from the besieged city of Aleppo, but her tweet told us all we needed to know: "I hate war".

There are 8.35 million children in Syria. Today nearly **two thirds** require humanitarian assistance with more than **1 million** living in hard-to-reach areas and **170,000** in besieged areas. Half of those internally displaced are children.

An entire generation of Syrians is making their perilous way from childhood to adulthood, covered by unending bombardment, under constant shadow of constant violence, living in permanent fear, deprived of basic goods and services, unable to exercise their rights to education, health care, to play. Almost every indicator shows that things were worse for Syria's children in 2017.

For all our humanitarian efforts; for all the evidence gathered; the monitoring and reporting; for all the negotiations, denials, politics and speeches; the Syrian conflict **escalated in 2017, driving the highest verified number of grave violations against children since 2012.**

Excellencies,

The scale, scope and gravity of crimes committed against children are shocking. Widespread human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law affecting or targeting children are being **committed by the Syrian authorities**. And perpetrated too **by armed groups**.

Children are arrested and detained for their family's alleged association with opposing armed forces. Girls, in particular, are subjected to sexual violence, including rape, forced marriage and sexual slavery by armed groups.

Homes, ambulance bases, hospitals, schools, which under international law, should be sanctuaries for children have been ruthlessly targeted. As the Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported last year, the targeting of schools is “**one of the most vicious patterns of the Syrian conflict**, ... estimated to account for half of all attacks on schools worldwide from 2011 to 2015”.

How many more of Syria's children will die this year from violence or in precarious flight from it? How much longer will the international community have such high tolerance for their intolerable suffering? How can it be we would allow such a cost to be borne by children, such a loss of children to be accepted? Is it not tantamount to a monstrous indifference to the suffering of children that security council resolutions for ceasefires are flouted; that humanitarian access was denied 105 times last year; that indiscriminate bombing continues to wreck its havoc on children?

Excellencies, children must matter more.

125,000 of them are trapped in **Eastern Ghouta** – many acutely malnourished, most profoundly traumatized. What is happening to those children is “**too graphic**” for our TV screens, but not graphic enough it seems to motivate those who can stop the senseless violence to do so.

The children of Eastern Ghouta, and elsewhere in Syria, are likely the victims of war crimes, and potentially crimes against humanity. Last month, UNICEF issued a press statement that they left largely blank but for the following - “We no longer have the words to describe children's suffering and our outrage. Do those inflicting the suffering still have words to justify their barbaric acts?”

No words can do justice to the suffering of the children of Syria, but we can keep our word to see that **justice for them is made possible**. To help secure accountability of all parties to the conflict, we urge States to renew the mandate of your **Independent**

International Commission of Inquiry on Syria; to support the **International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism**; and to refer Syria urgently to the **International Criminal Court**.

Excellencies,

Those responsible for this violence - within Syria and beyond - should know that they are being identified; that dossiers are being built up for their prosecution; and that, with evidence in hand, and before duly convened tribunals, they will be held legally accountable for those crimes that with malice, indifference and great cruelty they continue to wage with scant regard for Syria's children.

Thank you.