

Syria | The UNGA must bring accountability and affirm international will as multiple war fronts and chemical attacks devastate civilians in Syria

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The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) expresses its deepest concerns regarding the escalation of hostilities in Syria, most alarmingly exemplified by reports of chlorine gas use by the Syrian regime and their allies, and their continued indiscriminate attacks on the besieged Eastern Ghouta in the suburbs of Damascus. Fighting has intensified in the suburb of Idlib and suburbs of Damascus, while the Turkish assault on Syria's northwestern borders continues for the third week. These hostilities on multiple fronts are targeting civilian-populated areas, where the people of Syria continue to be massacred, starved, and expelled from their homes. The UN Security Council (UNSC) session held on February 5 ended in another failure, with paralysis in resuming the mandate of the chemical weapons probe, and an incapacity to hold the warring parties to account in conformity with the basic principles of humanitarian law.

Over 100 Syrians have lost their lives in the past few days, including at least 80 in Eastern Ghouta, and about 20 more from the alleged use of chemical weapons in Saraqeb in the suburbs of Idlib, as well as indiscriminate attacks in towns and villages such as Ariha, Maaret Inu'man and Mardikh between southern Idlib and the suburbs of Aleppo. The regime forces and its militia allies covered by Russian fighter jets are escalating their warring activities in these areas. While casualties are on the rise, including among women and children, attacks are also targeting medical facilities and civil defense personnel. At the same time, the Turkish forces are continuing their assault on northern Syria for the third week, with many civilian casualties caused by both warring parties. At least 5000 have been forcibly displaced, many of whom are being displaced for the second time as they sought safe haven on Turkish borders.

With fire zones expanding and intensifying, the Commission of Inquiry on Syria's (COI) Chair Paulo Pinheiro, on February 6th, denounced the warring parties' complete disregard of humanitarian law principles: "These reports are extremely troubling, and make a mockery of the so-called "de-escalation zones." While the COI has affirmed that they have evidence of international crimes being committed, the response to this escalation is – as usual – very timid. The UNSC remains incapable of taking action to address grave violations in Syria. Currently two drafts are circulating concerning the renewal of a mandate for a committee to probe the use of chemical weapons, after Russia vetoed the renewal of the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM)'s mandate last November.

CIHRS reiterates its stand that the time has long passed for investigations. The recurrent use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime does not need further evidence or confirmation. Since August 2013, most evidence led to the regime's direct culpability for various chemical attacks, causing hundreds of fatalities. There are already multiple UN reports that undeniably accuse the regime of using chemical weapons. There can be no more delay in taking action to bring the perpetrators to justice. In this regard, CIHRS welcomes the French initiative backed by thirty States to create an information-sharing network to bring perpetrators of chemical weapon attacks to justice. CIHRS further calls on France and supporting States to rally support around this initiative in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), and bring the UNSC paralysis to an end through an already long-overdue Uniting for Peace Resolution 377A. This resolution can most pertinently establish a Special Tribunal to have jurisdiction over crimes committed in Syria.

Recent events are further evidence that there can be no peace or end to the bloodshed and crimes in Syria without ending impunity. There have been multiple peace efforts, such as the recent UN-sponsored round of negotiations in Vienna, the Sochi Conference, or the continuous cease-fire talks in Astana. Yet none have yielded tangible or sustainable results because the parties sitting at the table have blood on their hands, and are unchained by any form of deterrence against their unrelenting targeting of innocent lives as a method of

warfare. Once again, the international community is called upon to uphold its responsibility and meaningfully cooperate under the auspices of the UN to bring an end to the horror in Syria.

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