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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office
of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic: implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 19/22

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report reflects the status of implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 19/22 of 23 March 2012, following the first report of the Secretary-General thereon (A/HRC/20/37), which covered the period up until 11 May 2012. The present report contains information on relevant developments up until 20 July 2012, a summary of the information submitted by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in notes verbales addressed to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights during the reporting period, as well as information on measures and actions taken by relevant international stakeholders.

The ceasefire that came into effect on 12 April 2012 held for several days. From 16 April until early May 2012, the cessation of armed violence was not fully respected, although a general reduction in violence was reported, including in the use of heavy weaponry. The presence of observers of the United Nations Supervision Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic in some areas appeared to have a calming effect. Since 10 May, the situation has deteriorated with a surge in the use of improvised explosive devices. At the same time, there were reports of intermittent fighting between the parties and the use of heavy weapons by Government forces. Late in May, conditions further deteriorated, with a rise in attacks by Government forces on population centres using heavy weapons and mechanized infantry as part of a campaign to clear anti-Government armed groups. These attacks were accompanied by an increase in attacks by anti-Government armed groups on

* Late submission.

Government security forces, as well as Government and civilian infrastructure, using small arms, improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenades. The continuous fighting between the parties, the use of heavy weapons by the Government and the increase in the use of improvised explosive devices resulted in heavy civilian casualties and mass displacement of civilians inside and outside the country.

During the period under review, reports were received of numerous human rights violations committed by Government forces, which may amount to crimes against humanity and, possibly, war crimes. There were also increasing reports that anti-Government armed groups were committing serious human rights violations.

It should be noted that, throughout the period under review, the six-point plan proposed by the Joint Special Envoy remained central to the efforts aimed at achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council condemned in the strongest terms the sharply escalating widespread, systematic and gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms perpetrated by the Syrian authorities, and requested action from the authorities to put an immediate end to all violence and all human rights violations.

2. In resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council requested that I present a report on the implementation of that resolution at its twentieth and twenty-first sessions. On 27 June 2012, my first report on the implementation of resolution 19/22, covering the period up until 11 May 2012, was presented to the Council (A/HRC/20/37). Pursuant to the request of the Council, the present report focuses on the status of implementation of resolution 19/22 and outlines relevant developments on the ground up until 20 July 2012. It contains a summary of the information submitted by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in notes verbales addressed to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) during the reporting period. Furthermore, the report includes information on measures taken by relevant international actors, including the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on the Syrian Crisis and other United Nations entities.

II. Recent developments

A. Current context

3. It should be recalled that, on 8 May 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) stated publicly that it had reached the conclusion that there was a non-international armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic between Government forces and armed opposition groups present and operating, in particular in Homs and Idlib provinces. On 16 July 2012, ICRC further stated that the confrontations between Government forces and armed opposition groups in several areas of the country, including but not limited to Homs, Idlib and Hama, had met the threshold of a non-international armed conflict.

4. On 2 July 2012, the High Commissioner briefed the Security Council on the human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. During her briefing, the High Commissioner recalled the obligation of both parties to abide by international human rights and humanitarian law. She reported on serious human rights violations committed by both parties that might amount to crimes against humanity and, possibly, war crimes, and urged that perpetrators be held accountable.

B. Efforts of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on the Syrian crisis

5. During the reporting period, the six-point plan proposed by the joint special envoy remained central to the efforts aimed at peacefully resolving the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. A detailed account of the implementation of the six-point plan was presented in my report to the Security Council on the implementation of Council resolution 2043 (2012) (S/2012/523), as well as my letters dated 25 and 27 May 2012 to the Council (S/2012/363 and S/2012/368).

6. On 7 June, the Joint Special Envoy reported to the Security Council that the six-point plan had not been implemented and that there had not been a cessation of violence,

despite the efforts of the United Nations Supervision Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic (UNSMIS) to support the parties to de-escalate the crisis. He reported that human rights violations continued, and that violence by Government forces had intensified, while anti-Government armed groups had declared that they would not respect the demand for the cessation of hostilities and intensified their attacks. On 30 June, in Geneva, the Joint Special Envoy convened a meeting of the Action Group for Syria consisting of the Secretaries-General of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, the European Union, the five permanent Members of the Security Council, as well as other countries with influence over the parties to the conflict. In its communiqué of 30 June 2012, the Action Group renewed the commitment to the six-point plan proposed by the Joint Special Envoy and set out principles and guidelines for a Syrian-led political transition.

C. United Nations Supervision Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic

7. It should be recalled that, following the announcement of the cessation of armed violence, brokered by the United Nations, that came into effect across the country on 12 April 2012, the Security Council authorized, in its resolution 2043 (2012), the deployment of UNSMIS. The Mission was deployed for an initial period of 90 days to monitor the cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties, and to monitor and support the full implementation of the six-point plan endorsed by the Security Council in resolution 2042 (2012). By 30 May 2012, UNSMIS was fully operational, and worked actively in support of all aspects of the six-point plan, while monitoring and supervising the cessation of violence.

8. In late May 2012, violence sharply increased throughout the country. The escalation of violence affected directly and indirectly UNSMIS observers and ultimately impeded the implementation of their mandated activities. On 15 June, UNSMIS temporarily suspended its operations owing to the increase in violence, the obstacles to monitoring the situation on the ground, and the direct targeting of its personnel and assets. UNSMIS resumed limited activities, subject to security conditions, on 26 June 2012. The Mission undertook visits to hospitals and schools in order to monitor, observe and report on the impact of the violence on the civilian population and to assess medical protection and humanitarian access.

9. On 20 July 2012, when the initial 90-day mandate of UNSMIS expired, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2059 (2012), in which it renewed the mandate of the Mission for a final period of 30 days. The Council indicated that further renewals would be possible only if it could be confirmed that the use of heavy weapons had ceased and a reduction in violence by all parties was sufficient to permit UNSMIS to implement its mandate.

III. Information from the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and its position with regard to Human Rights Council resolution 19/22

10. On 1 June 2012, OHCHR addressed, on my behalf, a note verbale to the Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic requesting information on any measures taken or envisaged by the Government to implement Human Rights Council resolution 19/22. On the request of the Permanent Mission, the submission deadline for that information was extended by one month, namely, until 11 July 2012. On 16 July 2012, the Permanent Mission addressed a note verbale to OHCHR providing it with information relating to resolution 19/22.

11. During the reporting period, OHCHR received 56 additional notes verbales from the Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic. Some were addressed to relevant special procedures mandate holders of the Human Rights Council, to treaty bodies and to the international independent commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. Some of the notes verbales included statistics on casualty figures among citizens. Others related to allegations of kidnappings, sabotage and looting of, and attacks on, private and public property, which the Government attributed to “terrorist armed groups”, as well as information on the number of explosives either defused by Government forces or exploded. Several notes verbales included information on official investigations into incidents of mass killings at Al-Houla and Al Qubeir, committed in May and June 2012, respectively. The present report includes a summary of the notes verbales specifically addressed to OHCHR and containing information relevant to the implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 19/22.

12. In its note verbale dated 16 July 2012, the Government reiterated that it continued to reject Human Rights Council resolution 19/22 on the grounds that it was political and went beyond the mandate of the Council to protect and promote human rights. The Government reiterated its commitment to all human rights mechanisms that were not “politicized”. It stated that resolution 19/22 failed to recognize the considerable efforts made by the Government to meet its commitments and international obligations towards its population, as well as towards political and governance reform. In the same note verbale, the Government provided information on human rights violations reportedly perpetrated by what it called “terrorist armed groups”. Information on alleged violations committed by Government forces or pro-Government militias was not provided.

13. The Government reiterated that armed groups continued to conduct criminal and terrorist acts against Syrian citizens while sabotaging public and private property. According to the Government, these groups received large quantities of weapons from some Member States, and manufactured others. The Government reported that it had discovered a large number of explosives and missiles in several warehouses and farms. It added that similar explosives were planted in crowded places, or targeted Government forces as well as citizens refusing to join or support “terrorist armed groups”.

14. The Government stated that, while Council resolution 19/22 attributed violations against children to the Syrian authorities, it disregarded violations committed by “terrorist armed groups” through killings, kidnappings and using children as human shields. According to the Government, these groups exploited children for political gain and for media purposes, inter alia, by filming children in emotional yet staged scenes attributing violations to Government forces. The Government reported that “armed terrorist groups” had prevented children from attending schools and attacked, set on fire and used schools as a base for terrorist acts and as detention facilities for torture and executions. In this context, the Government reiterated that it was aware of its responsibilities and obligations towards its population, in particular children, and that it had sought to raise awareness among parents on issues relating to child protection and the risks that they might face as a result of the acts of “armed terrorist groups”.

15. In the Government’s opinion, the fact that the Human Rights Council did not condemn the acts of “terrorist armed groups” in resolution 19/22 gave the green light to these groups to continue their brutal practices and human rights violations. According to the Government, the Council had failed to address funding, arming, training and harbouring by Member States of these “terrorist armed groups”.

16. The Government reiterated its position that Human Rights Council resolution 19/22 had failed to address the issue of sanctions and their negative impact on the Syrian people and on the already dire humanitarian situation in the country. According to the Government, the Syrian Arab Republic had been “subjected to more than 60 packages of

illegal unilateral coercive sanctions by the United States, the European Union, the League of Arab States, Turkey, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, Japan and others”. The Government pointed out that the sanctions targeted all aspects of life, including the economy, finance, agriculture, industry, food, medicine, tourism, transportation, science and culture. The Government described the sanctions as amounting to collective punishment aimed at obtaining political gain through pressure on the Syrian people, who were directly suffering from these unilateral measures.

IV. Implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 19/22

17. In its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council requested actions from the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, particularly in paragraphs 3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 13, 17 and 18. The Government, in its note verbale dated 16 July 2012, stated that the responsibility to implement the bulk of the demands to halt the violence and human rights violations made in resolution 19/22 lay on “terrorist armed groups” and on the Member States funding, supporting and harbouring these groups. The Government called upon the international community to put an end to this foreign intervention and to assert pressure on these Member States to stop human rights violations by proxy through the acts of “terrorist armed groups”.

A. Ending violence and human rights violations

1. Violence

18. The Human Rights Council, in paragraphs 3, 4 and 13 (a) of resolution 19/22, strongly urged the Syrian authorities to put an immediate end to violence and all human rights violations, and demanded that it meet its responsibility to protect its population. In paragraph 13 (c), the Council demanded that the Government withdraw all military and armed forces from cities and towns in accordance with the Plan of Action of the League of Arab States of 2 November 2011 and the League’s decisions of 22 January and 12 February 2012.

19. Under the six-point plan, the Government committed to bring an immediate end to all forms of violence by all parties and to protect civilians. It should be recalled that, in a communication addressed to the Joint Special Envoy on 1 April 2012, the Government had committed to the immediate cessation of troop movements, an end to the use of heavy weapons in population centres, and to begin to pull back military concentrations in and around population centres no later than 10 April 2012. Similar commitments to respect the cessation of violence from anti-Government armed groups were sought by the Joint Special Envoy.

20. The ceasefire that came into effect on 12 April held for several days. From 16 April until early May 2012, the cessation of armed violence was not fully respected; however, a general reduction in violence was reported, including in the use of heavy weaponry. The presence of UNSMIS observers in some areas appeared to have a calming effect.

21. In early May 2012, an increase in the number and size of improvised explosive devices marked a significant deterioration in the situation on the ground. On 10 May, in Damascus, two suicide-bomb attacks targeted Government facilities, resulting in the killing and injury of members of Government forces and of civilians. The following day, in Aleppo, a bomb exploded in a market area, and Government forces reportedly seized a truck carrying heavy explosive devices before it could detonate. At the same time, there were reports of intermittent fighting between the parties to the conflict and of an increase in the number of heavy weapons used by Government forces in or near population centres.

Anti-Government armed groups also attacked Government forces, installations and checkpoints.

22. In late May 2012, conditions deteriorated, as seen in the an increase in the number of attacks by Government forces on population centres, using heavy weapons, including tanks and artillery shelling, helicopter rockets, cannons and mechanized infantry, as part of a campaign to clear anti-Government armed groups. Heavy weapons were used particularly in Dar'a, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Rif Dimashq, and expanded to the larger urban areas of Deir el-Zour, Damascus and Aleppo. These attacks were accompanied by an increase in planned and coordinated attacks by anti-Government armed groups targeting Government forces, as well as Government and civilian infrastructure, using small arms, improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenades.

23. Allegations were made of the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force by Government forces during armed clashes that took place in populated areas. Such use of force resulted in heavy civilian casualties and mass displacement of civilians inside and outside the country. While the United Nations is unable to verify the number of casualties, the Government reported that more than 7,000 citizens had been killed. Some Syrian non-governmental organizations and opposition groups reported that between 13,000 and 17,000 citizens had been killed as a result of the crisis.

24. The Government did not provide any information on the withdrawal of heavy weapons from population centres during the reporting period, only stating that, when it had withdrawn heavy weapons from such areas during the visit of the League of Arab States observer mission, which was deployed in December 2011, the "terrorist armed groups" had reinforced their position quickly and continued to terrorize and intimidate civilians.

25. In its note verbale dated 16 July 2012, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic reported that it had issued strict orders to security forces not to use weapons, except in cases of self-defence, armed clashes with "terrorist armed groups" or to prevent horrifying acts against, or mass killings of, citizens in areas where the security forces were present. In the Government's opinion, the security forces carried out their duties with utmost professionalism, accuracy and self-control towards civilians while protecting their right to life from crimes committed by "terrorist armed groups".

2. Human rights violations

26. OHCHR received information indicating that Government forces continued to commit numerous human rights violations during the period under review, including arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other forms of ill-treatment in detention, sexual violence, extrajudicial executions and unlawful killings. Similar violations were reportedly committed against women and children. There were also increasing reports of abductions, torture and ill-treatment and murder of captured members of Government forces, pro-Government militia and civilians by anti-Government groups. Reports were also received of summary executions carried out by such groups of those in their custody after allegedly subjecting them to "speedy trials". OHCHR received other information indicating that anti-Government armed groups violated the rights to children, including by using children as soldiers. Other reports suggested that both Government forces and anti-Government armed groups had deployed snipers who targeted civilians.

27. In its note verbale dated 16 July 2012, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic stated that it had taken measures to promote and protect the human rights of all Syrians, without discrimination based on race, ethnicity, colour, sex, religion or affiliation.

28. The Government also reported that, since the beginning of the crisis, it had carried out transparent, impartial and independent investigations into human rights violations to hold perpetrators to account and to provide remedies to victims. It referred to the

establishment of a national independent legal commission to investigate all crisis-related crimes, reporting that it had reviewed more than 6,400 complaints and referred a large number of cases to the competent authorities. The Government also referred to a special commission of inquiry that it had established to investigate the events of Al-Houla of May 2012. The Government stated that both commissions enjoyed wide powers in accordance with the highest international standards, including the authority to demand access to any information deemed necessary. In the Government's view, the commissions had proven their ability to provide justice at the national level. In this context, the Government stated that the relevant authorities had imposed disciplinary sanctions against a number of members of Government forces, while others remained under investigation or were facing trial by competent courts.

B. Humanitarian assistance

29. In paragraph 9 of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council urged the Syrian authorities to ensure timely, safe and unhindered access for all humanitarian actors and to ensure the safe passage of humanitarian and medical supplies into the country. The humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate as a result of the intensified fighting. The continued violence and fighting hampered efforts to address humanitarian needs. Humanitarian actors estimated that, as at 13 July 2012, there were 1.5 million people affected by the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.

30. During the period under review, attacks on hospitals, medical facilities and ambulances increased, as did direct threats to and killings of medical personnel. Moreover, access to health, especially for those perceived to be affiliated with the opposition or anti-Government armed groups, was undermined by the occupation and use of hospitals as military bases or by the presence of Government forces inside or in the proximity of hospitals. Furthermore, there were reports of destroyed, burned or ransacked medical facilities by anti-Government armed groups. There were also reports that hospitals were used as military bases also by anti-Government armed groups.

31. Since my previous report on the implementation of resolution 19/22, the Government has agreed to the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan and the United Nations has scaled up its humanitarian assistance. Up to 800,000 people were provided with food assistance in July 2012. Non-food items, emergency health assistance, remedial education and other activities also increased. Despite the challenging security situation during the period under review, following the agreement with the Government, the United Nations was in the process of expanding its presence. Eight international non-governmental organizations launched their humanitarian response to the affected population and an increasing number of national non-governmental and community-based organizations were participating in the humanitarian response as of 13 July 2012. These efforts, however, remain insufficient to meet the growing needs.

32. In this context, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic recalled that, in March 2012, it jointly led a process to assess the humanitarian needs of those affected by the crisis. It stressed that it had implemented its commitment to allow the distribution of humanitarian aid in accordance with the relevant United Nations memorandum of understanding. Nevertheless, as at mid-July, only a small portion of the Humanitarian Response Plan had been funded, thus hindering the humanitarian response. The Government reported that it was also directly providing humanitarian assistance, including medical aid, food and other services, to those in need, and was implementing projects to reconstruct buildings to facilitate the return of displaced persons to their homes.

33. In its notes verbales dated 19 June and 16 July 2012, the Government stated that "terrorist armed groups" had prevented humanitarian aid from reaching those in need and

were targeting humanitarian workers. The Government attributed an attack made on 13 June 2012 on a convoy of ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which was targeted by an explosive device that wounded three workers, to “terrorist armed groups”. The Government added that, in June 2012, it had made several attempts to give ICRC access to areas in Homs controlled by “terrorist armed groups” to evacuate sick and wounded persons, the elderly, women, children and those with special needs, and to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid. According to the Government, “terrorist armed groups” refused to evacuate sick or wounded persons or to allow humanitarian assistance, and had targeted the humanitarian workers in the area for three weeks, until the Syrian National Reconciliation Committee, in coordination with relevant stakeholders, succeeded in evacuating 92 civilians. The Government stated that those who remained were used as human shields by “terrorist armed groups” that disregarded their obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law.

34. In June 2012, humanitarian actors reported that the implementation of a humanitarian ceasefire negotiated in Homs and Deir el-Zour with the parties to the conflict to allow the evacuation of civilians and bodies and the delivery of humanitarian and medical assistance had not been successful, with both parties not suspending hostilities as planned.

C. Refugees outside the Syrian Arab Republic

35. In paragraph 10 of resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council invited all relevant United Nations agencies, in particular the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to provide support to Syrian refugees and neighbouring countries hosting them.

36. As a result of the conflict, the refugee flow to countries neighbouring the Syrian Arab Republic continued unabated during the reporting period. The number of refugees has doubled since my previous report to the Human Rights Council. According to the Syria Regional Refugee Response compiled by UNHCR,¹ a total of 119,618 Syrian refugees, of whom 75 per cent are women and children, were receiving assistance in neighbouring countries at 19 July 2012 (42,682 in Turkey, 36,450 in Jordan, 32,486 in Lebanon and 8,000 in Iraq). UNHCR also reported that, owing to the increasing concern about the situation, more than 13,000 Iraqi refugees left the Syrian Arab Republic in the first half of 2012, most returning to Iraq.²

37. Syrians escaping the conflict increasingly sought shelter beyond the region. In Europe, the number of Syrian asylum seekers markedly increased. According to UNHCR, as at 20 July 2012, some 12,000 Syrian asylum applications had been submitted for European countries.³

38. A revised refugee response plan was launched on 28 June 2012 to help Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. As at 19 July, only 26 per cent of total needs were funded, putting host countries under considerable strain. In addition, an estimated 1 million internally displaced persons were reported in the Syrian Arab Republic as at the same date.

¹ See <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

² Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Humanitarian Bulletin, Syria, No. 3, 5 July 2012.

³ Ibid., No.5, 20 July – 3 August 2012.

D. Measures taken by the Government to meet the demands and aspirations of the Syrian people

39. In paragraph 11 (a) of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council urged the Syrian authorities to respect the demands and aspirations of the Syrian people. It should be recalled that the six-point plan and the communiqué of the Action Group were aimed at facilitating an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people. On 7 June 2012, in a briefing to the General Assembly and the Security Council, the Joint Special Envoy stated that the plan had not been implemented and that meaningful political dialogue was therefore not possible.

40. During the period under review, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic announced additional initiatives within the framework of political and governance reforms that it considered to be in pursuit of political pluralism and a democratic political process. Following the referendum of 26 February 2012, parliamentary elections were held on 7 May, and a new Government was appointed on 23 June.

41. The Government referred to a comprehensive national dialogue that it had launched in mid-2011, reportedly to reach a peaceful national solution. According to the Government, some parties continued to reject dialogue. It had nevertheless pursued its reform efforts, stating that the newly appointed national unity Government included a spectrum of national opposition members who rejected the use of weapons and were against foreign intervention. Furthermore, the Government pointed out that an opposition leader was acting as the Deputy Prime Minister, while another one had been appointed Minister to the newly-established Ministry of National Reconciliation to follow up on all the problems caused by the recent crisis and to find appropriate solutions in various fields.

42. The Government reported that it was carrying out democratic and comprehensive political, economic and social reforms, while prioritizing the issue of human rights. It stated that these reforms were aimed at achieving the demands of the people through elections and dialogue. It added that, within the framework of such reforms, it had revised the majority of laws in compliance with international standards, such as Election Law No. 101 (2011) and Political Parties Law No. 100 (2011), and abolished the Emergency Law and the State Security Court. The Government stressed that it adopted new laws, such as a law regulating peaceful demonstration, while taking into account international standards in the relevant fields.

43. The Government also referred to amendments made to the Constitution, which was approved through a referendum in February 2012. The amendments, according to the Government, included significant changes such as the abolition of article VIII of the Constitution, which articulated the role of the Baath Party in the leadership of the State and society, in addition to other paragraphs, taking into account reforms in the field of human rights and the State's international obligations and commitments.

44. The Government reported that it had introduced a new election system consistent with international standards, ensuring transparency, integrity and equal representation for all segments of society. It asserted that the new electoral system guarantees the rights to freedom of expression, opinion and peaceful assembly, and of belonging to political parties in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. According to the Government, 18 political parties took part in the elections, which reportedly represented a twofold increase in the number of licensed political parties. The Government pointed out that 5,186,957 citizens (51.26 per cent of the electorate) had voted freely in 15 electoral districts despite the exceptional circumstances on the ground and attempts to disrupt the electoral process by "terrorist armed groups".

E. Media and journalists

45. In paragraph 11 (b) of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council demanded that the Syrian authorities put an immediate end to all attacks on journalists and that they ensure adequate protection, fully respect freedom of expression and allow independent and international media to operate.

46. The Government pledged to ensure freedom of movement for journalists throughout the country and to ensure a non-discriminatory visa policy for them, in accordance with the six-point plan. After 25 March 2012, the Government accelerated the issuance of entry visas to journalists. During the period under review, OHCHR periodically received notes verbales from the Government concerning the number of international and Arab journalists and media organizations that had been issued entry visas. In the most recent communication on the subject, received on 16 July 2012 and covering the period from 25 March to 12 July 2012, the Government stated that more than 237 international media outlets had entered the Syrian Arab Republic. In this connection, it also referred to its letter dated 31 May 2012 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, addressed to the President of the Security Council and me (S/2012/389), in which it listed the names of 28 foreign journalists who had reportedly entered the country illegally.

47. As noted in my report to the Security Council on the implementation of Council resolution 2043 (2012) (S/2012/523), several international media outlets reported that visas had not been issued for several months to their journalists. Some Syrian journalists reported that they had been detained by Government forces or physically attacked or harassed by anti-Government gatherings. There were also reports that journalists affiliated to official Syrian media channels would not venture into areas controlled by anti-Government armed groups out of concern for their safety.

48. On 28 June 2012, the Government informed OHCHR that “terrorist armed groups” had attacked the headquarters of the Syrian news channel Al-Ikhabariya, near Damascus, on 27 June, destroying the station and killing three journalists, four team members and the security guards of the building. On 2 July, the Al-Nusra Front, on its website, claimed responsibility for the attack.

49. In the opinion of the Government, the Human Rights Council had overlooked the issue of sanctions imposed on Syrian governmental and non-governmental media outlets, the press and bloggers by some Member States. The Government referred to, *inter alia*, the resolution of the League of Arab States of 2 June 2012, in which it requested the administrators of the Arab satellite communications organization to take the action necessary to stop broadcasting Syrian governmental and non-governmental satellite channels. In the view of the Government, the resolution was aimed at censoring and excluding alternative views from the mainstream media discourse. In this context, the Government also referred to a note verbale of 19 June 2012 addressed to the President of the Security Council and me (A/66/853-S/2012/461). The Government saw these measures as unilateral and aimed at silencing the Syrian national media, in blatant contradiction with the principle of freedom of media and information and with the provision of the six-point plan regarding the freedom of movement of journalists. According to the Government, such measures gave the green light to “terrorist armed groups” to target Syrian journalists and media organizations.

F. Foreign nationals

50. In paragraph 11 (c) of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council demanded that the Syrian authorities take immediate steps to ensure the safety of foreign nationals in

the Syrian Arab Republic, including refugees and diplomatic staff members, and the protection of their property.

51. The situation in the Syrian Arab Republic has gradually and significantly affected the situation of refugees living in the country, including 500,000 Palestinian refugees and more than 103,000 registered Iraqi refugees.⁴ In June 2012, UNHCR noted that refugees inside the Syrian Arab Republic had not been directly targeted during armed clashes, even though they were increasingly reporting security incidents affecting them. The conflict had a negative impact on the ability to deliver protection and assistance to such refugees.⁵

52. In its note verbale dated 16 July 2012, the Government pointed out that it guaranteed the security and safety of all diplomats, refugees and tourists, as evidenced by its history as a haven for people who sought refuge from persecution or discrimination. The Government reported that a certain number of refugees had been killed by gunfire, explosives or other criminal methods, referring also to the discovery of the corpses of 19 young Palestinian men near Aleppo who had allegedly been kidnapped by “terrorist armed groups” and subsequently executed.

53. The Government pointed out that there was a category of foreigners “sponsored by other Member States” who had illegally entered the Syrian Arab Republic to carry out terrorist attacks. It referred to its letter dated 16 May 2012 addressed to the Secretary-General, the President of the Security Council and the Chairperson of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1373 (2001) concerning counter-terrorism (S/2012/328), in which it listed the names of 10 non-Syrian citizens who had illegally entered the country and been killed while engaging in terrorist armed operations against the Syrian army.

54. Furthermore, the Government reported that it detained 26 foreigners who, it stated, were engaged in terrorist acts. It pointed out that the leadership of al-Qaida had called upon its members to go and fight in the Syrian Arab Republic. According to the Government, once the involvement of foreign nationals was revealed, “terrorist armed groups” deliberately started disposing of the corpses of those killed, by burning or burying them in deserted areas or throwing them into rivers, to hide the proof of the involvement of foreigners. According to the Government, some of the Member States who had sponsored Human Rights Council resolution 19/22 were training, supporting and hiring mercenaries to fight in the Syrian Arab Republic, with complete disregard for international efforts to combat mercenaries, including relevant decisions of the General Assembly and the Council.

G. Cities under siege

55. In paragraph 11 (*d*) of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council demanded that the Syrian authorities lift the blockade of all cities under siege. The Government did not provide OHCHR with information thereon.

56. Further reports indicate that the number of checkpoints controlled by Government forces and by anti-Government armed groups increased throughout the country. Lists of wanted persons were reportedly circulated and individuals were arrested at checkpoints in the governorates of Homs, Al Ladhqiyyah, Idlib, Aleppo, Dar’a and Damascus. Government checkpoints were also reportedly preventing access of patients to health care.

⁴ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Humanitarian Bulletin, Middle East and North Africa, No. 2, May-June 2012.

⁵ The Government estimated the presence of some 1 million Palestinian refugees, and as many refugees from Iraq.

57. Information received by OHCHR indicates a pattern of military operations on alleged anti-Government strongholds that included cordons, the use of heavy weapons and house-to-house search operations. According to that information, targeted areas were cordoned off by checkpoints and the supply of water, electricity and other basic services was cut off. Reports show that, once the areas were cordoned, artillery and tank units supported by helicopters conducted heavy shelling. Ground forces then entered the areas to complete the military operations.

H. Plan of Action of the League of the Arab States

58. In paragraph 12 of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council called upon the Syrian authorities to implement the Plan of Action of the League of Arab States of 2 November 2011 in its entirety, as well as the League's relevant decisions, without delay.

59. In its note verbale dated 16 July 2012, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic stated that it had implemented in good faith the Plan of Action of the League of Arab States, and recalled that it had granted access to and facilitated the League of Arab States observer mission, and withdrawn its forces from the cities.

60. The Government also pointed out that it cooperated with the Joint Special Envoy, agreed to the six-point plan and implemented much of it, and sincerely supported and had facilitated the work of UNSMIS observers, and provided them with protection. These efforts, according to the Government, reflected its willingness to cooperate with the international community to reach a peaceful solution, which would be based on national dialogue. In this context, the Government accused "terrorist armed groups", and certain Member States that funded and armed them, of hampering UNSMIS observers from carrying out their mandate and the implementation of the six-point plan.

61. The Government stated that it remained supportive of political dialogue, and that there must be an international commitment and political will to implement fully the six-point plan. It stated that, unless the arming and financing of "terrorist armed groups" ceased, it would be difficult to implement the plan if only the Government was committed to it. The Government added that, while it welcomed the outcome of the meeting of the Action Group on 30 June 2012, the "terrorist armed groups" and the Member States that supported them were against that outcome.

I. Detainees

62. In paragraph 13 (b) of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council demanded that the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic release all persons detained arbitrarily due to the crisis in accordance with the Plan of Action of the League of Arab States and its decisions of 22 January and 12 February 2012.

63. Under the six-point plan, the Government has an obligation to intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons, including especially vulnerable categories of persons and persons involved in peaceful political activities, and to allow access to detention places. As noted in my report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2043 (2012) (S/2012/523), progress in this area was insignificant in a context where the status and conditions of thousands of detainees across the country remained unclear. This includes not only persons engaged in armed fighting but also human rights defenders, political activists, women and children.

64. During the reporting period, the Government addressed a number of notes verbales to OHCHR regarding detainees, stating that it had, as at 10 July 2012, released almost

4,200 detainees. In its note verbale of 16 July 2012, the Government reported that more than 10,000 prisoners had benefited from four presidential amnesty decrees, as did a large number of citizens who had surrendered, handed over weapons and made a written commitment that they would refrain from carrying weapons or otherwise prejudicing the security and stability of the Syrian Arab Republic.

65. The Government reported in several notes verbales addressed to OHCHR that it had released 206 detainees on 10 June 2012 and 500 others on 13 June. Furthermore, it reportedly released 275 detainees on 10 July and 92 on 17 July. The Government did not share with OHCHR the list and details of the persons released. UNSMIS observed the release of 609 detainees countrywide in the context of three Government release exercises on 31 May, 14 June and 11 July 2012, as noted in my report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2043 (2012) (S/2012/523).

66. In its note verbale dated 16 July 2012, the Government denied that its security forces had imprisoned, tortured and killed children, pointing out that, if children were mistakenly arrested, they would be released immediately and not brought to court provided that they were under the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

67. There are continuing reports of anti-Government armed groups abducting or kidnapping individuals. Reports were received that, in some cases, payment was made or ammunition was provided in exchange for the release of people in their custody.

J. Rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly

68. In subparagraphs 13 (*d*) and (*e*) of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council demanded that the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, in accordance with the Plan of Action and the decisions of the League of Arab States, guarantee the right to peaceful assembly and allow access for all relevant institutions of the League.

69. It should be recalled that, under the six-point plan, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic pledged to ensure respect for freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully. As noted in my report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2043 (2012) (S/2012/523), the broad context of human rights violations and intimidation in the Syrian Arab Republic does not constitute an environment in which citizens can express their opinions and demonstrate freely. Despite the risks of violence, protests continued to take place during the reporting period, albeit for shorter periods and on a smaller scale when compared with the demonstrations reported at the early stages of the crisis. Pro-Government demonstrations were also held in a range of locations.

70. There were continued reports of Government forces using excessive force, including live ammunition and lethal force, to disperse peaceful demonstrations in different parts of the country during the reporting period. According to reports received in May and June 2012, at least 200 demonstrators were treated for bullet wounds at local hospitals in Aleppo, of whom 10 reportedly died. Credible sources also reported that at least six civilian casualties, including four deaths, resulted from indiscriminate shooting by Government forces during a demonstration held in Aleppo on 6 July 2012. Furthermore, several demonstrators were detained for participating in protests without due process and held incommunicado.

K. Independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

71. In paragraphs 14 to 17, and 20 and 21 of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council referred to the mandate and work of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which was established by the Council in its resolution S-17/1. The commission continued to carry out its mandate, with full secretariat support provided by OHCHR. Pursuant to paragraph 14 of resolution 19/22, the commission presented an oral update to the Council at its twentieth session (A/HRC/20/CPR.1). The update included the preliminary findings of a special inquiry conducted by the commission in the events of Al-Houla, pursuant to Council resolution S-19/1. The commission will also present a written updated report to the Council at its twenty-first session (A/HRC/21/50).

72. In paragraph 17 of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council repeated its call upon the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to cooperate with the commission of inquiry. The chairperson of the commission visited Damascus from 23 to 25 June 2012 to discuss with the Syrian authorities the work of the commission. The details of that visit were reported in the commission's oral update. To date, however, the commission has not been granted access to the country to carry out in situ investigations.

73. In its oral report to the Human Rights Council, pursuant to resolution 19/22 (A/HRC/20/CRP.1), the commission of inquiry included information up until 15 June 2012. In the update, the commission stated that it had reasonable grounds to believe that people had been killed, arbitrarily arrested, detained, tortured and subjected to sexual violence by Government forces and pro-Government militia, and that crimes against humanity may have been committed by Government forces. The commission also reported that security forces personnel and civilians had been killed, abducted and tortured by anti-Government armed groups, who had increased their use of improvised explosive devices. The commission had not been able to ascertain responsibility for several incidents in which explosives were used.

74. In paragraphs 20 and 21 of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council decided to transmit the reports of the commission of inquiry to all relevant United Nations bodies and the Secretary-General for appropriate action, and recommended that the main bodies of the United Nations urgently consider the reports of the commission and take appropriate action to address human rights violations, as well as crimes against humanity that may have been committed. During the reporting period, I transmitted the oral update of the commission of inquiry (A/HRC/20/CRP.1) to the Security Council on 19 July 2012. It is recalled that I had transmitted the previous report of the commission (A/HRC/S-17/2/Add.1) to the Security Council on 13 December 2011.

L. Office of the High Commissioner and special procedures mandate holders of the Human Rights Council

75. In paragraph 18 of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council repeated its call upon the Syrian authorities to cooperate with the special procedures of the Council and with OHCHR, including through the establishment of a field presence.

76. In response to that request, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic reiterated in its note verbale of 16 July 2012 that it had collaborated in a serious and transparent manner with the special procedures of the Human Rights Council and other human rights mechanisms "eschewing politicization" in accordance with the State's commitments and international obligations. The Government also pointed out that it regularly provided

OHCHR with documented information, including the preliminary findings of the special commission of inquiry on the Al-Houla incident. The Government did not address the question of an OHCHR field presence in its note verbale.

77. On 1 June 2012, at the nineteenth special session of the Human Rights Council, all special procedures mandate holders presented a joint statement in which they deplored the alarming deterioration of the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic, emphasizing that all available information indicated that crimes against humanity, and possibly other crimes under international law, had been committed. The mandate holders called on the authorities to provide full and unhindered access to, *inter alia*, the special procedures.

78. Requests for visits to the Syrian Arab Republic by special procedures mandate holders of the Human Rights Council, including those by the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, remained pending. On 13 July 2012, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions addressed a request to visit to the country.

M. Efforts by the Secretary-General

79. In paragraph 19 of its resolution 19/22, the Human Rights Council invited me to take the measures necessary to support the efforts of the League of Arab States to achieve a peaceful solution to the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

80. It should be recalled that the Plan of Action of the League of Arab States of 2 November 2011, and the League's decisions of 22 January and 12 February 2012, were endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 66/253. In this context, I continued to support the efforts of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, whose mandate was based on resolution 66/253 and therefore reflected all relevant decisions of the League of Arab States. A detailed account of my efforts in this context was presented in my letters dated 25 and 27 May 2012 to the Security Council (S/2012/363 and S/2012/368), as well as in my report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2043 (2012) (S/2012/523).

81. During the period under review, I consistently called on all parties to step back from the ever-deepening confrontation and to cooperate with UNSMIS. I urged them to recommit in good faith to the fulfilment of their obligations under the six-point plan of the Joint Special Envoy, following the path outlined by the Action Group on 30 June 2012 with a view to paving the way for an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people.