



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
22 February 2013

English only

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## Human Rights Council

Twenty-second session

Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

### **Written statement\* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2013]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **The human rights situation in Syria**

Ever since the uprisings in Syria began in March 2011, unrest and fear have controlled the lives of civilians. All too quickly, the dream of a speedy transfer of power was overshadowed by the reality of heavy fighting. To date, over 60,000 people have lost their lives in the Syrian civil war. Daily, the media reports heavy fighting and killed civilians, including many children. For those who did escape with their lives, everyday life has become agony: for two years now, destroyed infrastructure and the constant danger of attack have prevented people from returning to their professions. In some cases, this has had catastrophic consequences for family survival. Food prices have skyrocketed—the price of flour has tripled in the past months—due to the grievous toll the war has on Syrian agriculture. Stores are insufficient, making dietary staples like bread a rare commodity. For hours, people stand in line, each family receiving a small daily ration of ten flatbreads. According to estimations, up to five million Syrians depend on external food and help.

The country's infrastructure is largely destroyed. Water and electric supply in rural areas is limited. Hospital care is severely compromised and industry and agriculture production have stalled in many areas under constant threat of violence. The country is in a state of humanitarian emergency, its population abandoned and reliant on outside help. There is a desperate need for food, grain, and fuel. Also lacking are hygiene and first aid products, as well as pharmaceuticals.

Especially worrisome is the situation in Idlib, in the governing districts north of Aleppo and in the north and northeast regions of the Latakia province.

### **Escape as a last resort**

The scarce resources have forced many who, until now, have been living from their own reserves to leave the country. To date, more than 700,000 Syrians have left their (destroyed) apartments and relatives behind, setting off into an uncertain future in a foreign environment. They sought protection in neighboring Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq (Iraq-Kurdistan) and in northern Africa. Within Syria, an additional 2.5 million people are on the run. So far they have taken cover in the more peaceful northern regions. But sooner or later, they too will have to leave the country as combat there has become more and more frequent. Few places in Syria have remained untouched from destruction and violence.

By summer the number of refugees will surpass one million. Yet the ability of neighboring countries to receive refugees is already approaching its limits, and life in a new country poses great challenge for the families, who often have many children. A lack of winterproof housing, overflowing schools, language barriers and poverty are only a few of the problems the people must confront. But at least they are safe here.

### **No end in sight**

It is entirely uncertain when security will be established in Syria so that the population may once again resume their normal lives. As of yet neither an end to the violence in Syrian nor a political solution to the conflict is apparent. In November 2011 it was revealed that all conflict parties are the perpetrators of grave human rights violations, including mass executions, arbitrary arrest, torture, sexual assault, and child abuse. A decisive step putting an end to such violations would be the prosecution of these atrocities. Yet warnings issued to all conflict parties and the requests to commence reliable, fair, and impartial proceedings have been ineffective. Furthermore, transfer to the International Court of Justice in The Hague was declined by veto powers Russia and China in the UN-Security council.

**The stolen revolution**

Responsible for a great share of the opposition's human rights violations are radical Islamic groups such as the "al-Nusra-Front". Such groups have had significant influence on the opposition, because they are well organized, skilled, and equipped. They capitalize on the situation and are supported and sanctioned by states such as Saudi Arabia, Katar, and Turkey. The problem is that the combatants implicate civilians in their fight, entrenching themselves in residential areas, although they are absolutely aware that the regime will react with large-scale bombing. Today, many Syrians rightfully believe that the Syrian revolution is out of Syrian hands. Accordingly they are in outspoken disaccord with armed opposition and campaign peacefully for a new Syria.

**Christians and Kurds in Syria**

From the earliest days of conflict, the opponents of the Islamic-dominated armed opposition have always been Syrian Christians, who consider a violent solution to the conflict unlikely and fear for the future of their lives in Syria. For example the patriarch of the Vatican endorsed Syrian-Catholic Church of Antioch, Ignatius Joseph III, spoke with trepidation of the Islamification of Syria. Other church leaders concur, including those of the Hasaka region, who have long called for protection for the relatively peaceful parts of the country against the penetration of radical Islamic rebels. They fear that the historically Christian, multiethnic and multi-religious country is heading toward an Islamic autocracy.

This fear is not unfounded. For some time now, attacks and church-bombings have targeted Christians. At least 14 churches have been demolished in the civil war, several wantonly, such as in Dair Az-Zur in eastern Syria, where a Syrian-Orthodox church was destroyed on 3. November 2012.

Christians are also being attacked on the Lebanese border in Wadi an-Nasara, most recently on 13. December 2013, as reported by several news agencies. The "Valley of the Christians", in which some 150,000 predominantly Greek Orthodox Christians in 40 towns and villages live and where tens of thousands of internally displaced Syrians from Homs and other cities have found refuge, has become a main target of Islamist militias.

However Christians are not the only targets of Islamist rebels, who have also besieged the Yazidi, a smaller non-Muslim Kurdish religious community. On 29 October 2012, an islamist group attacked the Yazidi village of Qestel Cindo in the Kurdish district Afrin in northwestern Syria. The attacks were stopped by a Kurdish militia, but the area remains under pressure. The Islamists intend to expel the Yazidi from the region.

The civil war in Syrian is developing into a fight between religious and ethnic groups. Turkmens, Kurds and Chrsitians have become entangled in the fight, in some cases these minorities have formed their own militias to defend themselves.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge all governments involved in the Syrian conflict to:

- End the weapons and money export to all civil war participants in Syria.
- Abrogate camps where militants are trained and educated before being sent to Syria.
- Work for religious freedom and freedom of opinion to be the long-term political solution for the new Syria. The foundation of a federal state would also be a welcome development, because this structure counters centralization of power. Either way, the representatives of a single population sector, such as Baschar al-Assad and his Alawit allies, must never again be allowed to dominate and overrun the government of a multiethnic, multi-religious state such as Syria.