

DECEMBER

SYRIA: VOICES IN CRISIS

A MONTHLY INSIGHT INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS IN SYRIA.



“VIOLENCE HAS NOT SPARED SCHOOLS IN SYRIA” AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SPEAKS WITH ACTIVISTS WHO WITNESSED THE ATTACK ON AL-HAYAT SCHOOL

Despite UN Security Council resolution 2139 calling on the Syrian government and armed groups to cease all indiscriminate attacks against civilian areas, parties to the conflict have continued bombarding civilian areas with weapons such as artillery, mortars and barrel bombs, unlawfully killing hundreds of civilians.

Since 22 February, when resolution 2139 was

passed, the Violation Documentation Centre in Syria has documented the names of at least 7,936 civilians killed by shelling and air strikes. This includes 12 (a thirteenth child was unidentified) children who were killed on 5 November by a rocket attack on al-Hayat school in al-Qaboun neighbourhood, in the Damascus suburbs.

A damaged play area of a school in the Jobar neighbourhood of Damascus following shelling by the Syrian army. August 2013. © Dimashqi Lens

Al-Qaboun neighbourhood is under the control of armed groups. Despite the Syrian government and armed groups in this area reaching a ceasefire around July, a school administrator told Amnesty International that on 5 November around 11.15am a rocket fell close to the school, and less than a minute later another fell on the playground killing and injuring boys playing there. Some 1,500 students from various Damascus suburbs are enrolled in the school, which is the only one in the vicinity.

An activist who arrived at the school a few minutes after the attack told Amnesty International:

“Around 11.00am I heard an explosion and saw smoke. Five minutes later I arrived; it was a catastrophe. I saw at least three children who had been immediately killed by the attack and many others severely injured. The worst part was seeing parents running around searching for their children. We transferred the children to a nearby medical point. Some of the children were disfigured and could not be identified.”

Two local contacts told Amnesty International that the rocket came from the direction of the special unit building, a Syrian army base located in al-Qaboun. Amnesty International could not independently verify their claim. A local activist filmed the debris a few minutes after the attack, and analysis by Amnesty International of the film indicates that the rocket used is likely a M-21 122mm, a very imprecise rocket system.

A local doctor who was working that day

told Amnesty international:

“I heard two explosions around 11.00am. At first, I did not know that the school was hit until activists and volunteers started bringing the injured children. In total, we received 25 injured children with severe and minor injuries, and the bodies of 13 children. The severe injuries included severed limbs and chest injuries caused by shrapnel.”

Amnesty International also spoke with Mustafa, a volunteer who helped transfer the bodies of the children: “I was near the school when the attack happened. When I arrived there the first thing I remember seeing was blood everywhere and flesh on the ground. I saw that some children had their legs or hands severed. It was a horrible scene and complete chaos. I transferred the bodies of children to the field hospital. I don’t remember how many I transferred but I remember that they were between 10 and 15 years of age.”

Mustafa continued: “I know that the Syrian government knows the location of the school, but what I don’t know is how anyone can attack an area where there is a school. Even the schools are not spared the violence and innocent children pay the price.”

The five residents and activists who spoke to Amnesty International confirmed that there are no military objectives near the school. The closest frontline is at least 800m away.

The Violations Documentation Centre identified the names of 12 children: Hamdi al-Bassal, Rajab Suliman Zino, Mouaz Abdullwahed, Walid Zaher Abdullwahed, Obada Samir Juaneh, Omar al-Tawashi, Zaher Hassan Aid, Radwan Ramadan, Abdullrahman Sadeq Shakour, Mohammad Amar al-Madani, Mohammad Ayman Shakour, Ali Nidal Abi Adan.

UNICEF, the UN children's fund, issued a statement stating that the attack on the al-Hayat school was "the latest in a series of indiscriminate attacks on schools, teachers

and students. In the first nine months of 2014 alone, the United Nations in Syria has verified at least 35 such incidents that killed 105 children and injured 293. The real numbers are surely higher, and there are indications that attacks in some areas may have been deliberate."

CASE FOCUS – FAMILY OF RANIA ALABBASI

“LET US ALL RAISE OUR VOICES FOR THEIR RELEASE!”



Rania Alabbasi © Private

Rania Alabbasi, her husband Abdullrahman Yasin and their six children aged between three and 15 years were arrested by the Syrian authorities in March 2013. The entire family has been missing ever since, victims of enforced disappearance.

Rania Alabbasi's sister, Naila Alabbasi, told Amnesty International:

“Rania played chess competitively and for many years represented Syria in international and regional competitions. She raised the profile of the game in Syria and was honoured by Basel al-Assad [older brother of current President Bashar al-Assad].

“A dentist, she was very popular among her patients and colleagues because she is energetic, honest and very good at her job. Her clinic was successful but she made sure that she could provide free treatment to those who couldn’t pay.

“Despite being busy with work and the children, Rania is very social and she always made time for her relatives, her friends and her neighbours. We, as her family, know her to be kind, generous and always there to help others, not just her family but anyone else who needed her.

“Rania and the whole families have visas to leave the country whenever they want but when the uprising started, she did not want to leave. She thought she and her family were safe because they had not participated in any political activities or belonged to any opposition party. They did not go to any demonstrations. So she thought nothing would happen to them.”

Officers of the Syrian Military Intelligence arrived at Rania Alabbasi’s home in the Damascus suburb of Mashroua Dummar on 9 March 2013. They arrested Abdulrahman Yasin without giving any reasons for his arrest. They returned the following day to confiscate valuables, papers and the family’s cars.

Two days later, they came for Rania and her six children, daughters Dima (now 15), Entisar (now 14), Najah (now 11), Alaa (now nine), Layan (now three) and her son

Ahmad (now seven). None of the family have been heard of since their arrests. Despite requests from their relatives, the Syrian authorities have not provided any information about their fate, whereabouts or reason for arrest.

Naila Alabbasi says: “We do not know anything about them. All attempts to find out anything have been unsuccessful. Maybe people were jealous of Rania’s success and wanted harm to come to them. But we must not forget Rania, her family and the other prisoners in similar situations. Let us all raise our voices for their release!”



Rania Alabbasi, Abdulrahman Yasin and their children (the picture was taken before the birth of Layan). © Private