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## **Snapshot of Syria – UN must take urgent action to ensure justice for victims of gross abuses**

Two years after Syrians rose in peaceful protest against their government, the country is mired in a bloody conflict with both sides responsible for war crimes, Amnesty International found in two briefings released today.

Research carried out inside Syria in the last fortnight confirms that government forces continue to bomb civilians indiscriminately often with internationally banned weapons, flattening entire neighbourhoods. Detainees held by these forces are routinely subjected to torture, enforced disappearances or extra-judicial executions.

Armed opposition groups have increasingly resorted to hostage taking, and to the torture and summary killing of soldiers, pro-government militias and civilians they have captured or abducted.

“While the vast majority of war crimes and other gross violations continue to be committed by government forces, our research also points to an escalation in abuses by armed opposition groups,” said Ann Harrison, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“If left unaddressed such practices risk becoming more and more entrenched - it is imperative that all those concerned know they will be held accountable for their actions.”

Our research has once again demonstrated that the Syrian government is using internationally banned weapons against civilians.

On 1 March, an Amnesty International researcher in Aleppo found nine cluster bombs that had been dropped from a fixed-wing aircraft on to a densely populated housing estate.

More than a dozen residents were killed and scores more injured, many of them children.

A resident from the al-Dik family told Amnesty International how his relatives were killed in the attack: “Inas, 2, Heba, 8, Rama, 5, Nizar, 6, Taha, 11 months, Mohammad, 18 months. They were all killed; why? Why bomb children?”

As always with such attacks, the site was left littered with unexploded bomblets, which will continue to kill and maim those who pick them up – often children.

Nearby, the arm of a child was recovered from beneath the rubble of a neighbourhood flattened by a long-range surface-to-surface ballistic missile fired from government forces hundreds of kilometres away.

Hundreds of residents, many of them children, were killed and injured in three such recent attacks which wiped out entire families.

Sabah, a 31-year-old woman who survived the carnage told Amnesty International about her loss: “My daughters, Isra’, Amani and Aya, aged 4, 6 and 11, my husband, my mother, my 14-year-old sister Nour, and my other sister’s three sons, Ahmad, Abdallah and Mohammad, aged 18 months, and 3 and 4 years. They were all killed, what is left for me in this life?”

Thousands have perished across the country in recent months in similar attacks by government forces with weapons which should never be used in civilian areas.

Elsewhere in Aleppo, the bodies of men and boys – shot in the head, hands tied behind their backs – are recovered almost daily from the river.

The bodies float downstream from a part of the city under the control of government forces.

Among the victims found in the first week of March were a 12-year-old boy and his father; they, like others identified so far, had disappeared in a government-controlled area of the city.

A video from another part of the country shows a boy apparently aged between 12 and 14 holding a machete standing over a man – later identified as Colonel 'Izz al-Din Badr.

He lies prostrate on the ground with his hands behind his back. A voice in the background shouts: “He doesn’t have the strength.” The boy brings the machete down on the man’s neck, cheered on by members of an armed opposition group.

“Children in Syria are being killed and maimed in increasingly large numbers in bombardments carried out by government forces. Many have seen their parents, siblings and neighbours blown to pieces in front of them. They are growing up exposed to unimaginable horrors,” said Harrison.

In an area in southern Damascus, witnesses described a “hole of death” - where armed opposition forces are believed to have dumped the executed bodies of pro-government fighters or those suspected of being informers.

In another case, an Amnesty International researcher was told how a man accused of being a collaborator was found after being killed by an opposition group.

A neighbour told Amnesty International: “We immediately went there and found him on a heap of waste, with a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead, a firearm injury to the shoulder...His knee was broken... A brown card hung on him with the words ‘collaborator (awayni), Colonel Helal Eid’.”

According to the UN, more than two million civilians have been internally displaced. Having fled their homes, many now face renewed shelling and bombing in the areas in which they sought shelter and have been displaced a second time.

Turkey has partially closed its border leaving thousands of internally displaced people stranded on the Syrian side in appalling conditions.

“With every passing hour of indecision by the international community, the death toll rises. How many more civilians must die before the UN Security Council refers the situation to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court so that there can be accountability for these horrendous crimes?” said Harrison.