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Aleppo satellite images show devastation, mass displacement one year on

[New satellite images of Aleppo](#) provide the most recent evidence of how the protracted conflict in Syria is resulting in massive human rights violations against the civilian population which is bearing the brunt of the spiralling violence, displacement, and humanitarian crisis.

The new analysis – one of the most comprehensive satellite image analyses of an active conflict zone to date – shows alarming trends in how the conflict is being fought: with utter disregard for the rules of International Humanitarian Law, causing extensive destruction, death, and displacement. The analysis was produced by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in collaboration with the Science for Human Rights program of Amnesty International.

The devastation revealed in the images has been substantiated by Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s Senior Crisis Response Adviser, who returned from a visit to Aleppo last month.

“Aleppo has been utterly devastated, its people fleeing the conflagration in huge numbers,” said Donatella Rovera, who has spent prolonged periods of time investigating human rights violations on the ground in Syria.

One year ago, on August 6, 2012, Amnesty International released satellite imagery of Aleppo and the surrounding areas in response to an escalation in fighting and reports of an impending offensive. The organization warned of grave risk to civilians in Aleppo and called on all parties to strictly adhere to humanitarian law.

By documenting the vast damage to Aleppo’s infrastructure since that warning was issued, the newly released analysis conducted by the AAAS leaves little question as to a significant cause for the staggering displacement of half of the city’s population: a campaign of indiscriminate air bombardment by government forces, which have also reduced entire areas to rubble and killed and maimed countless civilians. For example, comparative satellite images of neighborhoods devastated by three ballistic missile strikes launched by Syrian government forces between February 18 and 22, 2013, provide alarming evidence of the human toll of escalating tactics deployed by parties to the conflict. These three strikes alone killed more than 160 residents and injured hundreds, in addition to destroying scores of homes, leaving hundreds homeless.

With analysis of seven new images over a nine month period (early September 2012 to late May 2013), the project represents the most comprehensive physical damage assessment of Syria’s largest city to date. In addition to the destruction of infrastructure, the analysis also documents widespread damage within the Ancient City of Aleppo, a UNESCO world heritage site, such as the destruction of the minaret of the Great Mosque of Aleppo and damage to the Souq al-Madina. Under international humanitarian law, parties to conflict are obligated to respect and preserve cultural property.

Government forces have relentlessly and indiscriminately bombarded areas under the control of opposition forces across Syria, with civilians being at the receiving end of such attacks and at the same time also being subjected to abuses by some armed opposition groups. In Aleppo, the comprehensive survey demonstrates the physical destruction emblematic of the relentless bombardment. Satellite image analysis suggests that the destruction across the city is “severely lopsided” toward opposition-controlled neighborhoods, according to the assessment by the AAAS.

The analysis found hundreds of damaged or destroyed buildings over the study period, and tracked the increased proliferation of roadblocks, with over a thousand visible in imagery from late May 2013.

Donatella Rovera said: “The risk cited one year ago regarding the devastating consequences of turning what was Syria’s most populous city into a battlefield has become reality. Aleppo has been utterly devastated, many of its residents fleeing the bombardments in huge numbers and many others trapped in a city under fire and under siege in desperate humanitarian conditions.”

Rovera has crossed the border into northern Syria more than 10 times since April 2012, exposing abuses and documenting escalating war crimes including extrajudicial executions, summary executions, indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas, the use of banned weapons, and the killing of large numbers of children.

Christoph Koettl, emergency response manager at Amnesty International USA, who led the 2012 satellite imagery project said: “The grave violations of international law in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria are a direct consequence of the international community’s paralysis and delay in effectively condemning these crimes, and referring the situation to the world’s criminal court of last resort. The images are a snapshot of a population under brutal siege as Amnesty’s researcher on the ground has revealed over time.”

Protracted Conflict Fuels Regional Displacement Crisis

Over the study period, the AAAS analysis identified a near constant pace of destruction to Aleppo's infrastructure, including residential, religious, commercial, and industrial facilities. As the intensity of aerial bombardments and other attacks has continued to increase, the number of displaced Syrians has also risen several times.

Across the country, almost six million Syrians have been forced from their homes by the spiraling violence; most – 4.25 million – are displaced within Syria. Tens of thousands of Syria’s IDPs (“internally displaced persons”) are taking shelter in sprawling makeshift IDP camps that have sprung up near the Turkish border since early fall 2012, when the Turkish government effectively closed its borders to Syrian refugees (Amnesty International recently released satellite imagery showing the emergence and growth of some these makeshift camps).

Many of those internally displaced, especially those in areas controlled by the opposition, receive little or no international aid, partly because they are in dangerous and difficult-to-access areas and also due to restrictions imposed by the Syrian government on the movement of international humanitarian agencies. U.N. humanitarian agencies have called on the Syrian government to allow them to access opposition-controlled areas – where IDPs are in much greater need and the risk to their lives much higher because of relentless and indiscriminate bombardments by government forces.

End the International Paralysis

Combined with Amnesty International’s own field research and citizen video, the satellite image analysis adds to a growing body of evidence of potential war crimes in the conduct of the Syria conflict. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the U.N. Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, which would send an unequivocal message to the parties that anyone committing or ordering war crimes or crimes against humanity will be held accountable.

Concerted and effective pressure must be exerted on the Syrian authorities to allow U.N. agencies and

international humanitarian organizations unfettered access to IDPs and others in need throughout the country, including allowing cross-border access to the relevant areas from other countries, as well as across front lines within Syria. Pressure must also be put on the Syrian armed opposition not to hinder relief operations in the areas under their control.

At the same time, in line with international obligations, all neighboring countries must keep their borders open at all times to anyone fleeing Syria. The international community, in particular the European Union and its member states, must commit to sharing responsibility for Syrian refugees in real, tangible terms. This should include, for example, agreeing to resettle much greater numbers of Syrian refugees, as well as providing urgent financial and technical support to Syria's neighboring countries hosting the overwhelming majority of those who have fled the violence.