Russian Forces Commits a Massacre of IDPs in Ma’aret Misreen in Idlib Region Prior to Announcing a Ceasefire Agreement

Double-Tap Airstrike Policy Used to Kill Paramedics and Civilians Indicates Savagery and Barbarism

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Friday, March 27, 2020
The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.

Contents
I. Russian Forces’ Violations Continue with or Without Agreements
II. The Civilian Death Toll Since the Announcement of the Russian-Turkish Ceasefire Agreement on January 12, 2020
III. Documentation of Russian Forces’ Responsibility for Ma’aret Misreen Massacre That Killed 15 Civilians and Injured 19 Others
IV. Documentation of Syrian-Russian Alliance Committing 77 Massacres in Idlib Region in Northwest Syria Since April 26, 2019, According to the SNHR’s Database
V. The Responsibility to Protect Civilians in Syria
VI. Legal Qualification and Recommendations

I. Russian Forces’ Violations Continue with or Without Agreements
The strategy of the Syrian regime and its Russian ally in Syria is based on concluding agreements to establish the borders of the areas which they have already taken control of in order to prepare for attacks on new areas. It is, in short, delusional to trust that Russia and the Syrian regime will sincerely commit to respecting any local, regional, or international agreement after the constant stream of violations they have committed, some of which amount to crimes against humanity. Since April 26, 2019, the Idlib region in northwest Syria, which includes the northeastern suburbs of Hama, Idlib governorate, the southwestern suburbs of Aleppo, and the northwestern suburbs of Latakia, has seen a military escalation by Syrian-Russian alliance forces with five cease-fire agreements, as follows:
The first: Announced by the Syrian regime on August 1, 2019.
The second: Announced on August 31, 2019, after the failure of the first one.
The third: Announced on January 9, 2020, when Major-General Yuri Borenkov, chief of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of the Opposing Parties in Syria, declared the start of a ceasefire in Idlib region, starting at 14:00 on the same day.
The fourth: The Turkish Ministry of Defense announced that it had concluded a ceasefire agreement with Russia that would enter into force at 00:01 on January 12, 2020.
The fifth: The agreement that resulted from the meeting of the Turkish and Russian Presidents, which came into force at 00:00 on March 6, 2020.
We can easily notice the area of land that the Syrian regime seized control of between the first agreement and the last agreement, with hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced, tens of thousands of homes destroyed, and their contents largely looted by Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias after taking control of them.
The Syrian and Russian regimes, apparently unsatisfied with bombing towns and villages, displacing their residents and looting their properties, even extended their bombardment operations to the temporary and inadequate refugee camps the people were displaced to, as happened in an attack carried out by Syrian Regime forces on Qahh IDP Camp in November 2019, and in another attack carried out by the Russian Air Force on a random IDP camp near the M5 International Road in Joubas village, south of Saraqeb city in December 2019; SNHR has previously issued reports documenting the two attacks. The Syrian-Russian alliance forces have also targeted vital civilian facilities in areas outside the Syrian regime’s control simply to further intimidate and traumatize the dispossessed peoples and to maintain a climate of constant fear and terror to wear them down. Some of these facilities had been transformed into shelters for IDPs, as is the case with the attack that we will address in this report, in which fixed-wing warplanes that we believe were Russian targeted a poultry farm sheltering IDPs in Ma’aret Misreen town in the northern suburbs of Idlib, resulting in the deaths of 15 civilians, including two children.

Methodology:
This report provides a documentary record of the double-tap airstrike launched by fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, on a poultry farm sheltering IDPs in Ma’aret Misreen town in the northern suburbs of Idlib, and notes that this massacre was simply one in a long series of massacres committed by Syrian-Russian alliance forces which have continued since April 26, 2019 and are still ongoing up until the publication of this report on March 27, 2020.
In gathering first-hand information, the SNHR has relied on field researchers working for us, who helped to obtain direct testimonies from survivors, victims’ relatives, relief workers and media activists, assisted by the extensive network of contacts we have built up through our nine years of work. This report contains four of the first-hand accounts we collected through speaking directly with witnesses or survivors, none of which are cited from any open sources. We explained the purpose of these interviews beforehand to the witnesses, who gave us permission to use the information they provided without us offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR endeavors always to spare the witnesses the agony of remembering the violations as much as possible, providing assurances that we will conceal the identity of any witness who prefers to use an alias.
SNHR also analyzed videos and photographs that were posted online, or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media platforms. Videos posted by activists show, amongst other things, the sites of attacks, and the bodies of the deceased victims and the injured, as well as the scale of destruction caused by the attacks.

We also retain copies of all the videos and photographs included in this report on a confidential electronic database, as well as keeping hard disk backup copies. We do not claim, however, that we have documented all cases, given the severe prohibitions, restrictions and persecution by Syrian Regime forces and some other armed groups.

Our investigations confirm that all of the attacks included in this report targeted civilian areas where we documented no military presence or armories belonging to factions of the Armed Opposition or to extremist Islamist groups before or during the attacks, and where Syrian Regime forces failed to issue any warnings to civilians prior to any of the attacks as required by international humanitarian law.

This report only represents the bare minimum of what we were able to document, given the vast actual severity and magnitude of the violations that have occurred. Also, it doesn’t include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications of these events.

II. The Civilian Death Toll Since the Announcement of the Russian-Turkish Ceasefire Agreement on January 12, 2020

According to the SNHR database, we documented the deaths of 387 civilians, including 104 children and 62 women (adult female), at the hands of Syrian-Russian alliance forces in Idlib region in northwest Syria between January 12, 2020, and March 27, 2020. These were distributed as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces**: Killed 174 civilians, including 40 children and 18 women, distributed as follows:
  - Idlib governorate: 142, including 34 children and 14 women.
  - Aleppo governorate: 32, including six children and four women.

- **Russian forces**: Killed 213 civilians, including 64 children and 44 women. These were distributed as follows:
  - Idlib governorate: 111 civilians, including 24 children and 28 women.
  - Aleppo governorate: 102, including 40 children and 16 women.
III. Documentation of Russian Forces’ Responsibility for Ma’aret Misreen Massacre That Killed 15 Civilians and Injured 19 Others

Ma’aret Misreen area is located in the northern suburbs of Idlib, and is seen as a destination for thousands of IDPs. Due to its distance from the M4 and M5 International Roads, its proximity to the Turkish-Syrian border (approximately 25 km line of sight), and its location in an area relatively far from international roads, it was a choice of destination for thousands of families displaced from the suburbs of Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo. Thousands of families, as well as the original residents, now live in the city and on surrounding farms, which is under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay’at Tahrir al Sham.

On Thursday, March 5, 2020, at around 02:05, fixed wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, carried out a raid using at least two missiles, targeting a poultry farm where IDPs from Idlib and Aleppo suburbs were living. The poultry farm is located on the western outskirts of Ma’aret Misreen town - about 2 km line of sight - on the road between Ma’aret Misreen and Batenta. The poultry farm building consists of two hangars used for raising chickens, which are linked on the western side to a two-storey residential building where the IDPs were living. At the entrance to poultry farm there is a building for guards where IDPs also reside.

At around 02:27, after the recovery operations for the wounded and the injured had begun, the same warplanes again targeted the site with at least two missiles. No casualties were reported in this second attack among the paramedics and rescue workers, who were able to escape the scene prior to the bombardment. We note that we were unable to accurately verify the number of missiles and the impact site of each of them up until the time of preparing this report, because the attacks were carried out at night, and because we have been unable to visit the site of the incident so far.

The two attacks resulted in **the deaths of 15 civilians**, including **two children** and **seven women**, and **injured at least 19 others**, in addition to **killing hundreds** of **birds** that were in **the hangars**, and **almost complete** destroying the poultry farm building and some of the houses surrounding it.

**Victims’ Names:**
The SNHR contacted Marwan Abu Hatem, the commander of the Civil Defense Center in Ma’aret Misreen city, whose team went to the site of the massacre after hearing loud explosions from the western outskirts of the town. He told us: “We arrived at the site about 20 minutes after the first raid was carried out, with Russian reconnaissance aircraft flying over in the air, according to the observatories’ reports circulation, which warned us minutes after of the presence of Russian warplanes in the implementation status, so we left the site immediately,” Marwan added that they moved their vehicles and put them among the trees in a place relatively far from the site of the massacre as a precautionary measure before returning to the site to recover those stuck under the rubble following these second airstrikes: “Transferring the victims took a long time due to our vehicles being some distance from the place and we kept working until the morning, where we had recovered 15 victims, including women and children, and more than 15 injured, all of whom were among the IDP residents at the poultry farm and homes surrounding it.”

1 Via WhatsApp on March 5, 2020
Laith al Abdullah, a media worker for the Civil Defense Organization - Saraqeb Center, headed with his team to the site of the massacre to support the team from Ma’aret Misreen, which was subjected to a double-tap airstrike. He told the SNHR the following: “At around 2:00 am on March 5, Russian warplanes launched a violent raid on Ma’aret Misreen, the sound of which resonated across Idlib suburbs. The warplanes launched another raid about 25 minutes later. Following the second attack, we received calls to support the Civil Defense team at the site, so we immediately went there. Upon our arrival, I saw the scale of the great destruction that had taken place, which seemed as if the missiles used were of a new type that were more powerful, as I saw three large holes in the place when I arrived. We worked until about 08:30 and we were able to retrieve the bodies of a female child, a woman and two men.”

Laith confirmed that the death toll from the attack was 15 martyrs, some of whom died after arriving at the hospital, and 19 injured, in addition to the deaths of hundreds of chickens that were in the poultry shed.

Ahmad al Atrash, a media activist lives about 5 km from the massacre site, who went to the site on the morning of March 5, told us: “I was in my house when the Russian warplanes - according to what the observatories’ reports circulated - carried out two raids on the outskirts of Ma’aret Misreen, and I heard the sound of explosions, but I could not go to the site at night. In the morning, I went with some media workers to report on the massacre, and upon my arrival there, I was surprised by the great destruction in the targeted poultry and the surrounding houses; the Civil Defense teams were still working to recover the martyrs, and I witnessed the recovery of a female child, a woman, then a man, all of whom had died.”

---

2 Via WhatsApp on March 5, 2020
3 Via WhatsApp on March 5, 2020
Visual guide of the impact site of a Russian air attack which targeted a poultry farm sheltering IDPs, resulting in a massacre in Ma’aret Misreen town:

Visual guidance showing the site of Russian air attack resulted in a massacre against IDPs in Ma’aret Misreen town in Idlib northern suburbs on March 5, 2020.
All of the people we contacted assured us that the observatories circulated reports warning of the presence of Russian warplanes in the air when the two raids were carried out, and that the targeted area is agricultural land that contains some poultry farms and houses and was free of any military presence.

To discover more details about the type of warplane that carried out the attack, the SNHR contacted Ahmad Meghlaį, an observer of air traffic in the suburbs of Idlib governorate: “During my tracking of the warplanes’ movement, at 01:23 on March 5, Russian warplane took off from Hmeimim Airbase, reached the airspace over Jabal al Zaweya area at 01:39, then flew in a circular way over the area; at 02:01, it reached the airspace of Ma‘aret Misreen, then started to fly in a circular way and carried out the first raid on the area. The warplane remained in the airspace until 02:27, when it carried out the second raid on the same place then returned to its airbase; between the two raids, the Russian surveillance aircraft did not leave the airspace.”

Based on all of these facts, we, at the Syrian Network for Human Rights, believe that the warplane that carried out the attack belongs to the Russian Air Force.

Destruction of a poultry farm building as a result of a Russian air attack on Ma‘aret Misreen, Idlib, resulting in a massacre against IDPs - March 5, 2020 – Photo by Aref Watad

4 Via WhatsApp on March 6, 2020
IV. Documentation of Syrian-Russian Alliance Committing 77 Massacres in Idlib Region in Northwest Syria Since April 26, 2019, According to the SNHR’s Database

The aforementioned Ma’aret Misreen massacre is simply one in a long and violent series of massacres committed by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, with this massacre added to an extensive archive of massacres in which Russian-Syrian alliance forces practiced a double-tap airstrike policy with the aim of killing paramedics and Civil Defense personnel and inflicting the largest possible number of civilian victims, a tactic that once again indicates the Syrian regime’s and its allies’ brutal mindset and underlines the fact that there has been no end to its criminality and Mafiosi behavior. We also note that this massacre was committed in conjunction with consultations between the Turkish and Russian Presidents, which concluded to a ceasefire agreement, in reference to a desire to kill as many people as possible before the beginning of the ceasefire.

According to SNHR’s database, Syrian-Russian alliance forces committed 77 massacres in Idlib region in northwest Syria between April 26, 2019, and March 27, 2020. These were distributed as follows:

- Syrian Regime forces: 48, distributed as follows:
  Idlib governorate: 46
  Aleppo governorate: Two.
- Russian forces: 29, distributed as follows:
  Idlib governorate: 19.
  Hama governorate: Five.
  Aleppo governorate: Five.

According to the SNHR’s Victim Documentation team, the massacres documented resulted in the deaths of 647 civilians, including 224 children and 134 women (adult female). This means that 56 percent of all the victims were women and children, which is a very high proportion of the casualties, and a clear indication that civilian residents were specifically targeted in most of these massacres.

The death toll from these massacres was distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:

- Syrian Regime forces: 386 civilians, including 139 children and 71 women.
- Russian forces: 261 civilians, including 85 children and 63 women.
Among these attacks we documented 15 massacres committed by Syrian-Russian alliance forces since the ceasefire agreement entered into force at 00:00 of January 12, 2020, until March 27, 2020, distributed as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces**: Four (three in Idlib governorate and one in Aleppo governorate).
- **Russian forces**: 11 (four in Aleppo governorate and seven in Idlib governorate).

**V. The Responsibility to Protect Civilians in Syria**

For nine years to date, the Syrian regime has committed heinous crimes and violations against Syrian civilians on a daily basis. It has also consistently failed to comply with any of the demands of the International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, or those of the High Commission for Human Rights, or even Security Council resolutions. The Security Council, which is supposed to take collective measures and action under Article 41 and 42 of the Charter of the United Nations, has also failed because of the immunity granted by Russia to the Syrian regime, with Russia routinely using its veto in the case of the Syrian regime, which not only failed to abide by its responsibility to protect civilians, but committed the most egregious violations against them, reaching the level of crimes against humanity, and extermination within detention centers through torture.

In a report issued in December 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty stressed that: “The Security Council should take into account in all its deliberations that, if it fails to discharge its responsibility to protect in conscience-shocking situations crying out for action, concerned states may not rule out other means to meet the gravity and urgency of that situation.”

Such conscience-shocking situations are exactly what have continued to happen routinely in Syria, not only in the form of one massacre or one violation but in constant, industrial-scale killings and torture, sexual violence, enforced disappearances, the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, and sieges against civilians. The list of crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Syrian regime and its allies is long, exhaustive and ongoing. The Security Council has signally failed to assume its responsibilities in the Syrian case, despite the Syrian Network for Human Rights, international organizations and UN commissions of inquiry crying out for action by the Security Council many thousands of times. In this context, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty also affirmed in the aforementioned report: “it would be impossible to find consensus, in the Commission’s view, around any set of proposals for military intervention which acknowledged the validity of any intervention not authorized by the Security Council or General Assembly. But that may still leave circumstances when the Security Council fails to discharge what this Commission would regard as its responsibility to protect, in a conscience-shocking situation cry-
ing out for action. It is a real question in these circumstances where lies the most harm: in the damage to international order if the Security Council is bypassed or in the damage to that order if human beings are slaughtered while the Security Council stands by.”

At the 2005 Summit, states unanimously agreed that each country had a responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from egregious crimes, or itself is committing such crimes as in the case of the Syrian regime, it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.

VI: Legal Qualification and Recommendations

- Syrian and Russian forces have violated several rules of International Humanitarian Law, primarily by failing to discriminate between civilians and combatants or between civilian and military targets, instead bombing hospitals, schools, civilian centers and neighborhoods, with these violations amounting to war crimes.

- International Humanitarian Law emphasizes the need to show respect for civilian objects, assigning for them a special protection status, and classifying the targeting of these facilities as a war crime; Article 52 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions defines Civilian Objects as: “….all objects which are not military objectives” while Military Objects are categorized as: “those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.” Civilian objects include medical facilities, educational facilities, infrastructure facilities, places of worship, and other facilities used for civilian purposes.

- Displacement or forced displacement is a war crime in non-international armed conflicts when committed as part of a deliberate or widespread attack against the civilian population (Articles 8 (2) (b) (7) and 8 (2) (e) (8) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court), and may also be considered crimes against humanity (Articles 7 (1) (d) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court).

- The Syrian-Russian alliance forces have violated the de-escalation zone agreement in all regions, including the Idlib region.
• Syrian Regime forces have explicitly violated the Sochi Agreement by carrying out artillery bombardment of a number of villages and towns in the fourth de-escalation zone, mostly in the demilitarized zone, the eastern suburbs of Hama and the southeastern suburbs of Idlib. These attacks have resulted in civilian casualties.

• The Syrian and Russian regimes’ forces undoubtedly violated UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 and 2254 which demanded the cessation of indiscriminate attacks, as well as violating a wide range of customary International Humanitarian Law rules, and also violating articles 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute by committing intentional homicide, all of which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

• The incidents of bombardment have incidentally caused civilian casualties, including injuries, as well as causing significant damage to civilian objects. There are very strong indications suggesting that the damage was extremely excessive in comparison to the intended military benefit, with the attacks failing to discriminate between civilians and combatants in most cases. Also, it seems that some of the attacks appear to have deliberately targeted vital facilities and civilian areas.

• The report issued by the delegates to the 2005 Summit states unanimously that each country had a responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from egregious crimes, or itself is committing such crimes as in the case of the Syrian regime, means that it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.

Recommendations:

UN Security Council:

• The Security Council must take additional steps following its adoption of Resolution 2254, which clearly insists that “all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such.”

• The Security Council must pass a resolution to stabilize the ceasefire in Idlib and include punitive measures for all violators of the ceasefire.

• The Security Council must provide genuine support for serious implementation of the peace process in Syria and for achieving a just political transition that guarantees security and stability.

• The Syrian issue must be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those involved, including the Russian regime, must be held accountable, having been implicated in committing war crimes.
• The Security Council must ensure the establishment of peace and security and the implementation of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect civilians and save Syrians’ lives, heritage and cultural artefacts from destruction, pillage and vandalism.

• The UN Security Council must pass a resolution concerning some seven million internally displaced persons in Syria that addresses forced displacement, to ensure that this does not become a long-term crisis, and must put pressure on the Syrian regime to end displacements, and enact laws aimed at preventing the plunder of displaced persons’ properties and possessions.

The UN Secretary-General:

• Should clearly identify perpetrators of violations, thus contributing to condemning their actions, disclosing their practices, and sending a message of solidarity to the affected communities. Ignoring any mention of the perpetrators of apparent violations simply encourages them to commit more violations and to repeat them.

• Should request that the Security Council take urgent action and hold an emergency meeting to ensure a ceasefire and to protect tens of thousands of displaced civilians.

International Community:

• In light of the split within the Security Council and its complete ineffectiveness, action should be taken at the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people that can protect them from the daily killings and siege and increase support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be applied in local courts regarding these crimes in order to conduct fair trials for all those who were involved.

• The SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ principle in dozens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) after exhausting all political channels from the Arab League’s plan, then Mr. Kofi Annan’s plan proved fruitless. Therefore, the steps recommended under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations should be adopted and the norm of the “Responsibility to Protect”, which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.

• Renew pressure on the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

• Work to ensure justice and achieve accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and to implement the principle of universal jurisdiction.
• The countries that support the parties to the conflict in Syria, especially Russia, must put pressure on their allies on the ground to ensure the neutrality of the Idlib area from combat operations, and protect the lives of at least three million people living there.

UN General Assembly
• Must attribute full responsibility to the Syrian regime for the displacement of over one-third of the Syrian people, including legal and material responsibility, and must also ensure that victims receive full compensation for the heavy losses they have suffered, including the return of looted properties to their owners.

OHCHR
• The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations concerning the violations committed by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces.

UN special Envoy to Syria
• Condemn the perpetrators of the crimes and massacres and the main culprits in the collapse of agreements on de-escalation zones, and thus declare the collapse and the end of the political process in full, as well as holding the Syrian-Russian alliance responsible for this.
• Disclose to the Syrian people Russia’s pursuit of full control of Syrian territory by force, and its public desire to rehabilitate the current regime, which means the creation of a political solution which satisfies only its own interests.

Donor countries and OCHA
• The international community and donor countries must ensure basic living conditions, pay attention to the needs of and help provide care for thousands of displaced Syrians who are displaced in the north-western Idlib suburbs, to ensure they are furnished with the most pressing basic needs, primarily water, food, housing, clothing and medical care.
Russian forces
• Stop committing all types of war crimes in Syria.
• Reconstruct what was destroyed by the Russian war machine.
• Compensate victims financially and morally, and apologize publicly.
• Commit to compliance with the outcome of the Sochi Summit and not repeat the scenario of violations we have seen in the agreements of de-escalation zone.
• Stop supporting the war crimes and crimes against humanity which the Syrian regime has been committing for nine years, with the current support being categorized as direct involvement in these crimes.
• Contribute to the assistance of displaced persons who were displaced by the Russian war machine from the Eastern Ghouta in the Damascus Suburbs governorate and the governorates of Homs and Daraa, and protect the residents of those areas who remained from the arrests, persecution, kidnappings and enforced disappearances being perpetrated by the Syrian Regime and the Iranian militias.

The Syrian regime:
Stop killing Syrian citizens and abide by the Syrian constitution.
Adhere to the rules of customary humanitarian law and stop committing war crimes.

Acknowledgment and Condolences
We offer our sincere condolences and gratitude to all local people and activists, whose contributions have enriched this report.