Satellite Imagery Proves that Russian Attacks Have Exterminated Entire Eastern Ghouta Towns

Approximately 3 Million Residences Were Destroyed Completely or Almost Completely in Syria, 90% Were Destroyed at the hands of Syrian Regime Forces and Russia

SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Thursday, May 31, 2018
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. Introduction and Methodology
II. Barrel Bombs Alone Equate to Seven Atomic Bombs
III. Eastern Ghouta, a Prolonged Siege and Heavy Bombardment and Destruction
IV. A Scorched-Earth Strategy to Raid and Destroy Eastern Ghouta
V. Casualties in the Aftermath of the most Recent Bombardment and Destruction Campaign
VI. Killing and Destruction for the Purpose of Forced Displacement
VII. Attachments
VIII. Conclusions and Recommendations

I. Introduction and Methodology
Carried out by Russia primarily using its air and artillery arsenal, and Iran and the Syrian regime secondly, the heavy, savage bombardment offensive on Eastern Ghouta that kicked off in last February was unlike anything Syria has seen since the popular uprising broke out in March 2011, and this includes the brutal attacks on Eastern Aleppo’s neighborhood at the end of 2016. Even though, the Syrian regime deliberately destroyed residences in Homs city at first, this strategy was expanded to include all and every area that revolted against the Syrian regime in order to forcibly displace their residents who lost their homes and workplaces which meant that any form of resistance against it has been effectively ended in the targeted area of the Syrian lands, even if the cost for that was destroying the infrastructure, vital facilities, and residences, or even if the Syrian state, with all of its components, was the price for that. SNHR’s database includes tens of thousands of shelling incidents that resulted in the destruction of the aforementioned. We’ve concluded that aerial bombardment has been responsible for 70% of the resultant destruction, and only the Syrian regime and Russia possesses an air force, besides international coalition forces, but one has to bear in mind that the destruction that resulted from international coalition’s air attacks is absolutely incomparable to what the aerial bombardment of the Syrian regime and Russia has caused.
Subsequently, the Syrian regime and Russia deliberately made sure to bomb and destroy as many residences, especially vital facilities, as possible. Most of these air attacks were devoid of any military justification as per the law of war, as this wide destruction was a deliberate tactic, the purpose of which was to send a message to the areas that were thinking of trying to break away from the Syrian regime’s control that your fate will only be destruction and doom, and that no one will protect you, not the UN or the Security Council. This very same tactic is used with torture and releasing some survivors in order to reveal the barbarian torture they had to suffer during their detention.

Approximately 3 million residences have been damaged, either partially or destroyed completely, as millions of Syrians have lost their homes. Losing ‘a home’ for many Syrians means that quarter of a century of labor and hard work, just to acquire a house, has just gone to waste, while many houses have been passed down from one generation to another. We have found out, through tens of past reports, particularly the monthly report on targeting vital facilities that destruction has been used by the Syrian regime in a widespread manner as a scheming tool against everyone who revolted against it, where the Syrian regime aimed, through this destruction, to end and shatter all forms of dissidence, and demolish the entire society. The Syrian regime and its allies have always enjoyed the upper hand from a military standpoint, particularly for possessing an air force, which made them the best suited and most capable of engineering the destruction operations.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:

“The satellite imagery we are in possession of prove, as well as the methods that have been adopted by the Syrian regime since the start of the bombardments, that destruction is an essential and primary purpose within the existing regime’s strategy. Since 2012, we have noticed a strategy to ‘kill cities’ and specifically the areas that revolted against the Syrian regime in order to displace their people before looting those areas and seize it completely. This barbarian strategy also involves a staggering amount of violations that constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes.”

**Methodology**

This report is dedicated to demonstrate a destruction model that Russia has primarily implemented in a barbarian and savage fashion with the Syrian regime and Iran. The report sheds light on Eastern Ghouta towns and areas and draws a comparison between the destruction in those areas since the start of their siege in October 2013 until March 2018.
through satellite imagery acquired by SNHR that were taken in those dates. The report also includes a basic analysis for the military progression and the strategy implemented to take over the villages and towns of Eastern Ghouta.

This report draws upon the information that we’ve acquired by examining accounts from survivors, eyewitnesses, and media workers who witnessed the systematic bombardments and were able to document the great destruction that befell the towns of Eastern Ghouta, especially outskirts towns, and verifying them against each other, in addition to reviewing pictures and videos we have received and verified using our special software. We have copies of all the videos and pictures included in this report in a secret online database as well as backup copies on hard drives.

It should be noted that this is the bare minimum, which we have been able to document, in light of extraordinary difficulties, mainly security-related ones, since all the workers and people who cooperate with us in Eastern Ghouta have hid in basements under the ground, which made the process of recording the violations that occurred more difficult. We also have to note that most of the residents of Eastern Ghouta, and Syria, have lost the sense of purpose in documentation in light of the amount of violations they had to witness over the past seven years and the international community’s shameful failure to deter and hold the Syrian regime and the other violation perpetrators accountable. This report doesn’t cover the social, economic, and mental ramifications.

II. Barrel Bombs Alone Equate to Seven Atomic Bombs
The Syrian regime and Russia have used various types of weapons to bomb the Syrian cities and towns, including artillery, tanks, helicopters, fixed-wing warplanes, scud missiles, thermobaric bombs, and cluster munitions among others. It was always noticeable in the Syrian regime’s strategy to destroy cities and towns that the destruction occurs most often away from the battlefronts. As for barrel bombs, which we have a special monthly report for seeing that the Security Council has specifically prohibited the use of barrel bombs in one of its Resolutions (that wasn’t implemented, same as other Security Council Resolutions on Syria), we have released an extensive report in which we pointed out that the Syrian regime has dropped 70,000 barrel bombs at least on Syrian lands. Assuming that a barrel bomb contains 200 kg-worth of TNTs, using 70,000 barrel bombs implies that the Syrian regime has dropped a staggering 14 million kilograms worth of TNT on Syria (70,000 * 12 = 14,000,000) which equates to using seven atomic bombs at the very least.
III. Eastern Ghouta, a Prolonged Siege and Heavy Bombardment and Destruction

The towns of Eastern Ghouta have fallen under a siege enforced by Syrian regime forces since October 2013. The siege has gradually become a form of collective punishment, while the aerial and artillery shelling continued in parallel with a comprehensive starvation policy. Nonetheless, the Syrian and Iranian regimes’ forces failed to have a breakthrough until Russia decided to intervene with their air forces in early-2018, where Eastern Ghouta were bombed with all kinds of heavily-destructive weapons and munitions between February 18, 2018, and April 12, 2018. Residents of Ghouta saw swarms of warplanes, particularly Russian ones, fly and drop missiles, followed by other swarms sequentially and alternatively, in addition to the Syrian regime helicopters and fixed-wing warplanes taking part in firing missiles and dropping barrel bombs.

The Russian forces have been notably involved in the most recent offensive that started on February 18, 2018 despite the Russian Ministry of Defense denying that, as all accounts we have acquired, including ones from central signal operators, have unanimously confirmed that Russian warplanes (Su-22, Su-24, and Su-35) were heavily involved and had that airstrikes were carried out by warplanes that took off from Hmeimim Airbase, a Russian military airbase.

Syrian regime forces resorted to the heavy use of barrel bombs, in addition to using chemical weapon and cluster munition. We’ve recorded the use of AO-2.5RTM, AO-2.5RT, and SBPE cluster submunitions which were loaded in RBK-500 missiles.

Over the course of this offensive, we’ve monitored a more frequent use of incendiary ammunitions, whether the ones dropped from the sky, or fired from rocket launchers. Those ammunitions were used to target populated area that are far from the first clash lines. This caused fires in houses, infrastructures, and agricultural lands, as well as sever civilian injuries. All of this was towards pressuring everyone into submitting.

We’ve also recorded the use of explosive hoses on the outskirts of Irbeen and Harasta cities. Those hoses are improvised ammunitions that are fired from the Russian minesweeper UR-7 and it causes huge explosions over tens of thousands meters.

Additionally, attacks using ground ammunitions were carried out widely, as Syrian regime forces used medium-range rockets that were fired from the 89th Regiment which is stationed in Jbab town, northern Daraa governorate, in addition to locally-made surface-to-surface rockets.
85% of the bombardments and attacks were concentrated in populated areas away from the first clash lines. Most of these attacks exhibited an indiscriminate, improvised nature, while, in some cases, these attacks deliberately targeted vital facilities. In light of the extraordinary challenges and circumstances, we have been able to record the following attacks that were carried out by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces using internationally-prohibited weapons and weapons the use of which are prohibited in populated areas between February 18, 2018 and April 12, 2018:

Surface-to-surface rockets: 3,968
Barre bombs: 1,674
Artillery and mortar shells: 5,281
Explosive hoses: 4
Incendiary ammunitions: 60
Cluster munitions: 45

This jarring amount is what our team in SNHR has been able to record. It is worth reiterating that no another area in Syria has seen this focused shelling before, which led to startling destruction, as seen in the satellite imagery acquire by SNHR in the following areas: al Shefouniya, Beit Sawa, Douma, and Misraba

Two satellite images showing the destruction in al Shefouniya town as a result of the Syrian-Russian attacks between October 2013 and March 2018
Satellite images showing the destruction in Misraba town as a result of the Syrian-Russian attacks between October 2013 and March 2018

Two satellite images showing the destruction in Beit Sawa town as a result of the Syrian-Russian attacks between October 2013 and March 2018
Two satellite images showing the destruction in Douma city as a result of the Syrian-Russian attacks between October 2013 and March 2018

IV. A Scorched-Earth Strategy to Raid and Destroy Eastern Ghouta
A. Most prominent land forces that were involved in raiding and then looting
Following thousands of airstrikes, primarily carried out by Russian air forces (we estimate them at 3,000 by Russian warplanes alone between February and April 2018), land forces’ role began. We have been able to identify the most notable land forces that took part in raiding, destroying, and then looting Eastern Ghouta areas

- Forces affiliated with the Air Force Intelligence, led by the Brigadier Suheil al Hasan, who works closely with Russia
- Nosour al Zawb’a, the military wing o the Syrian Nationalist Party
- Al Ghaith Forces of the 4th Armoured Division, led by Maher al Assad
- The 104th and 105th Brigades of the Republican Guard
- The 3rd, 9th, and 10th Armoured Vehicles Division of the Syrian Army
- National Defense Militias, such as Saraya Rukn al Din
- Der’ al Watan militias of the Rami Makhlof-backed Jam’iyet al Bustan
- Hefz al Netham Units of the Criminal Security, in addition to units from the Military and Political Security, as well as State Security

Also, these raids saw the notable involvement of a number of Iraqi Shiite militias:
- Lewa al Imam al Hussein militias
- Lewa al Sayyidah Zaynab militias
- Lewa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas militias, as well as Lewa Dhu al Faqar
In addition, other foreign forces took part in the offensive, most notably:
• The Arab National Guard (militias that enlist mercenaries and volunteers from Arab states)
• Liwa al Quds (Palestinian)
• Iranian Revolutionary Guard

Moreover, we’ve recorded a Russian presence on the ground that manifested in a Russian division and an operation center directed by Russian officers.

B. A raid strategy with no regard for human or destructive cost
Syrian regime forces and their allying Iranian militias have established five axes for raid: Harasta city front, al Mashafi front between Douma and Harasta cities, the Homs-Damascus international highway front, and the two fronts of Housh al Dawahra and al Nashabiya, in addition to the most important one, al Shefouniya town front. Syrian regime forces aimed to split Eastern Ghouta to three sections, starting with the east side where they relied on a strategy called “al Sadd al Zahef” (The Creeping Wall) which is basically a moving fire wall that requires a large number of cannons and fighters, and a large amount of indiscriminate shells. This tactic aims to kill as many victims as possible and create as much destruction as possible. This tactic goes back to WWII when Russia used it to fight off the Nazi Germany’s attack on Stalingrad city.

Satellite imagery we have acquired have revealed the comprehensive destruction of the towns of al Shefouniya, Misraba, and Beit Sawa, as well as Douma city which the Syrian regime broke through after vastly heavy and concentrated airstrikes in terms of numbers and type.

The United Nations Institute for Training and Research has published an analytic map that show the damaged resulting from the bombardment in Eastern Ghouta areas using satellite imagery collected on March 6, 2018. These images were compared to others acquired on February 23, 2018. The destruction was estimated at an overall area of 94.7 km². The map was split into cells to distinguish new damages, as the institute monitored that 28% of the cells were affected by new damages, including 14% that were heavily damaged, while the other 14% suffered minor damages. Most of these damages were concentrated in the towns of Misraba, Hamouriya, Beit Sawa, and Harasta.
Al Shefouniya
This town suffered the majority of the indiscriminate and deliberate attacks in the period of time between February 18, and the end of the same month when Syrian regime forces managed to take control. Even though al Shefouniya is a small town of an area of less than 5.4 km², the town was rained with approximately 204 airstrikes carried out by Syrian-Russian fighters, in addition to around 115 barrel bombs dropped by government helicopters. Rocket launchers, also, fired approximately 195 surface-to-surface rockets and 285 artillery shells. The destruction cover more than 75% of the town.

The offensive forced 6,000 civilians to flee al Shefouniya town. Those civilians were the vast majority of al Shefouniya residents before the recent offensive in mid-February. About 85% of them fled to Saqba, Hamouriya, and Ein Tarma towns, while 15% headed for Douma city.

Misraba town
Syrian regime forces continued marching west after taking over al Shefouniya town to seize Misraba town, as well as a number of villages in the town’s vicinity, such as Madyara and Beit Sawa. Misraba town, which has an area of approximately 1.8 km², suffered a vicious shelling using all kinds of weapons, as we’ve recorded 149 Russian-Syrian airstrikes, no less than 271 surface-to-surface rockets, 284 artillery and mortar shells, and 95 barrel bombs dropped by government helicopters between February 18 and March 9 when Syrian regime forces managed to completely take control of the town. By analyzing pictures, video, and satellite imagery, the complete or almost complete destruction of the town can be estimated to be around 60% of the infrastructure and residential neighborhoods.

Prior to the recent offensive, Misraba town had a population of approximately 36,000 people. 80% of them fled to Douma city. Some survivors’ accounts suggested that hundreds of families were still trapped inside bunkers, as they weren’t able to flee in light of the heavy bombardment. This raises concerns that Syrian regime forces might have carried out retaliatory field-executions against whoever residents were left.

Madyara village
With Syrian regime forces taking over Madyara village on March 11, Eastern Ghouta was split into two sectors after the raiding forces met with the military forces who were stationed on Idarat al Markabat (Vehicle Administration) front in Harasta city. Madyara village, of an area of 1.3 km², was targeted with approximately 103 Syria-Russian airstrikes, as well as 65 surface-to-surface rockets, 175 artillery and mortar shells, and 75 barrel bombs dropped
by Syrian regime helicopters between February 18 and March 11. The destruction was approximately 85%, as al Joura and Karm al The’b neighborhoods were the most damaged neighborhoods where both were wiped off completely.

Madyara village had a population of approximately 4,500 people. Most of the residents fled to Zamalka and Ein Tarma areas.

**Harasta city**

Harasta city has an area of approximately 10 km². The city suffered approximately 700 air-strikes while Syrian regime forces rained the city with no less than 1,430 surface-to-surface rockets, and about 926 artillery and mortar shells between February 18 and March 21 when an agreement was struck between Syrian regime forces and the armed opposition factions who were in control of the city. The destruction was approximately 40% of the city, as entire neighborhoods were destroyed almost completely.

V. Casualties in the Wake of the most Recent Bombardment and Destruction Campaign

The brutal, heavy shelling has left an overwhelming destruction as shown in the satellite imagery. In addition, large numbers of victims were killed, including many who were killed in the rubble of their homes or shops. Most of Eastern Ghouta residents sought shelter in basements which were used as rudimentary shelters, but this wasn’t enough to prevent the killing of many victims in light of the amount, type, and unprecedented approach to the bombing on populated cities. The following is an outline of the most notable patterns of violations that were perpetrated by Syrian-Russian alliance forces in Eastern Ghouta, which SNHR team was able to record from the start of the offensive until it ended – February 18, 2018 to April 12, 2018.

- Killed no less than 1,843 civilians, including 317 children and 280 women (adult female)
- Killed 15 medical personnel, including 3 women, and 12 civil defense members
- 5 civilians, including 1 woman, died due to food and medication shortages in light of the siege
- No less than 68 massacres were perpetrated
- Around 61 attacks on vital civilian facilities were carried out

VI. Killing and Destruction for the Purpose of Forced Displacement

Using their air force, this major Russian intervention and daily, connected airstrikes, has resulted in the destruction of entire cities and towns, and killed large numbers of civilians. The objective was to force residents to submit and sign evacuation agreements or stay and
live under degrading circumstances that violate the international human rights law. Indeed, Russian forces managed to do so, in coordination with Iran and the Syrian regime, who promptly issued decree no. 10 that sanctions the seizure of the properties of anyone who couldn’t come back to claim his residence. All of this is in the service of the demographic change that Iran and the Syrian regime are trying to establish.

On March 21, 2018, negotiations between the Syrian regime and the armed opposition factions who were in control of Harasta city took place after Syrian regime forces tightened the siege on the city on March 11. Negotiations resulted in an agreement that provided for the evacuation of fighters and civilians to Idlib city, while those who wish stay will have their affairs settled under degrading conditions that violate the rules of the international human rights law. Another agreement was struck on March 23 that involved the cities and towns of the middle sector of Eastern Ghouta (Irbeen, Zamalka, Ein Tarma, and Hazza).

On March 25, 2018, negotiations kicked off with the military factions who were in control of Douma city, and lasted for a few days. The negotiations resulted in the evacuation of thousands of residents. On April 6, 2018, Syrian-Russian alliance forces resumed the shelling on Douma city after negotiations hit a roadblock. The attacks weren’t only escalated to an unprecedented degree, but also chemical weapons were used in order to press the residents and the entire popular base into forcing the fighters to submit and surrender, which was the case, as waves of evacuation were resumed on the day following Douma chemical attack on April 7. The last wave exited the city on April 12, 2018.

All of these agreements have evacuated approximately 65,000 from the various areas of Eastern Ghouta to north Syria. In addition, about 130,000 exited through corridors established by the Syrian regime in the cities of Douma and Harasta, and Hamouriya town to Syrian regime-held areas, where those IDPs were kept in nine temporary shelters in Damascus suburbs. Syrian regime forces separated the males from the females and barred them from entering Damascus city without a sponsor, and only after their security situation is addressed.

Civilians weren’t safe from arrest, as we recorded, between mid-March and mid-May 2018, 78 cases of arrest made by the Syrian regime in the shelters.

One of Harasta negotiations’ provisions explicitly stated that residents are allowed to return to the city after the sweeping carried out by Syrian regime forces is completed. This provision wasn’t included in the negotiations on the other areas of Eastern Ghouta. Consid-
ering the systematic destruction that the cities and towns of Eastern Ghouta had suffered, however, none of those areas will be habitable, as they require a wide re-construction, as well as infrastructure and service rehabilitation which will, surely, inhibit the return process and pave the way for the Syrian regime to establish new constructional schemes that could carry a major change in the demographic nature of the damaged areas which will, in turn, effectively undermine the original residents’ right to return to their homes.

In mid-May 2018, Syrian regime forces allowed hundreds of families to return to Douma city after the security operation was completed. Merely a few days after their return, Syrian regime forces started carrying out almost-daily raid and arrest campaigns that targeted young men aged 20-38 year old to take them to mandatory, or reserve, military service. SNHR has documented that no less than 58 individuals were arrested, including 11 individuals of 45 years of age, as those had already settled their security situation in the shelters. The fate of those detainees is still unknown to us.

None of the areas that had similar agreements in the past years, whether in Old Homs’s neighborhoods, Eastern Aleppo’s neighborhoods, or the cities of Western Ghouta, saw an actual return of their residents, as the Syrian regime require a set of procedures to establish ownership and documenting sale contracts, such as acquiring security permits, in addition to adopting procedures that lead to the seizure of some houses and properties which were previously owned by families of armed opposition fighters or human rights activists. We will dedicate a lengthy research that tackles all the areas that had displaced evacuation agreements and the subsequent demographic replacement.

**VII. Attachments**

A video aired by AFP that shows the huge destruction in Irbeen and Harasta cities in Eastern Ghouta – March 2018

A video recorded from air and aired by Russia Today Agency that shows the huge destruction in Eastern Ghouta – April 2018

A video recorded from air that shows the huge destruction in Eastern Ghouta – April 2018

A video recorded from air and aired by Russia Today Agency that shows the huge destruction in Saqba city, Eastern Ghouta – March 2018
VIII. Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance forces have, beyond any doubt, violated Security Council Resolution 2401 which states that hostilities must be ceased and the preceding Resolutions 2139 and 2254 which state that indiscriminate attacks must end. Also, these forces violated, through the crime of willful killing, Article 7 and 8 of Rome Statute, which constitutes war crimes.

2. Russian-Syrian alliance forces have used indiscriminate and highly-destructive weapons. Also, these forces have used prohibited weapons such as cluster munitions and chemical weapons.

3. The bombardments has resulted in collateral damages that involved the casualties, injuries, or significant damages to civilian objects. There are strong indicators suggesting that the damage was too excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.

Recommendations

Security Council

- The Security Council should take additional action after Resolution 2401 was adopted, as the Resolution explicitly states that hostilities must be ceased and the delivery of humanitarian aids into besieged areas must be facilitated. However, this wasn’t implemented on the ground.
- Adopt a binding resolution that prohibits and punishes the crime of forced displacement and effectively puts an end to the forced displacement. This resolution should also explicitly establish the IDPs’ right to a safe return to their homes and to a compensation for the damages they had to endure.
- Bind the Syrian regime to cease the settlement and replacement operations that are being carried out in the cities and neighborhoods whose residents have been displaced
- Forced displacement is a threat to the region and the Syrian lands, as it undermines security and stability. Instilling security and peace in Syria is an essential part of the Security Council’s missions, responsibilities, and capabilities.
- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who were implicated should be held accountable, including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes have been proven.
- Instill peace and security in Syria and implement the ‘Responsibility to Protect (R2P)’ norm, in order to save the Syrian people’s lives, heritage, and arts from being destroyed, looted, and ruined.
- Expand sanctions to include the Russian, Syrian, and Iranian regimes who are directly involved in perpetrating crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Syrian people.
International community

• In light of the Security Council’s division and utter inability, action should be taken on the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people. This would manifest in protecting the Syrian people from the daily killing and lifting the siege, as well as raising the support with respect to relief efforts. Additionally, steps should be taken in order to exercise universal jurisdiction on these crimes before national tribunals as part of fair trials for all those who were involved.

• SNHR has repeatedly called, as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP), for the implementation of the ‘Responsibility to Protect (R2P)’ norm in tens of studies and reports after all political initiatives, through the Arab League agreement and then Mr. Kofi Annan’s plan and the Cessation of Hostilities and Astana agreements that followed, have been to no avail. Therefore, after all of this, action should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ norm, which was established by the UN General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.

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

• Works towards achieving justice and accountability in Syria through the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, and use the principle of universal jurisdiction.

OHCHR

• Help with establishing a central data for residences and properties in Syria in order to achieve compensation and carry out voluntary return programs in accordance with the UN’s “Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons” known as the Pinheiro Principles.

UN special envoy to Syria

• Expand Security Council briefings rather than only limiting them to the violations of al Nussra Front and ISIS

• Condemn the perpetrators of the crimes, the massacres, and those who were primarily responsible for breaching Security Council resolutions
**Russian regime**

- Ensure the safety of the civilians who want to exit and that they won't be arrested or forcibly disappeared
- Immediately cease bombing and killing civilians and targeting their vital facilities and homes
- Stop shielding the Syrian regime at the Security Council and using veto to prevent the passing of any international resolution that punishes the Syrian regime.
- Work on reconstruction, particularly the medical facilities and schools that were destroyed by Russian forces

**Acknowledgment and Condolences**

Our most heartfelt gratitude and condolences to all the residents and local activists who effectively contributed to this report
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