Urm al Kubra Village Massacre by Russian Forces is a Clear Message of Blood and Terrorization

Russian Forces Kill 36 Civilians, including 20 Children, in Urm al Kubra village, Western Suburbs of Aleppo

Tuesday, September 11, 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.

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I. Introduction
Urm al Kubra village is administratively a part of al Atareb district in western suburbs of Aleppo. The village has been under the control of factions from the armed opposition since November 2011, except for a brief period in early-January 2014 until January 14, 2014, where the village fell into the control of ISIS. Urm al Kubra village has a population of approximately 40,000 people, about 24,000 of them are IDPs from the governorates of Homs, Damascus suburbs, Hama, and Aleppo city.
The village is part of what came to be known as the “fourth de-escalation zone” which was established in May 2017 under the sponsorship of Turkey, Russian, and Iran who were guarantor parties. The fourth de-escalation zone consists of Idlib governorate and its vicinity (parts of Hama and Aleppo governorates).

Idlib governorate and its vicinity have been the target of an alarming military escalation which started on August 10, 2018, as Syrian regime forces started mobilizing in the villages of northern Hama suburbs and launching air and land attacks that targeted villages and towns in southern suburbs of Idlib and eastern suburbs of Hama, most of which targeted civilian residents. Those attacks aimed to terrorize and send the residents into a state of panic to drive them to flee north or submit.
Given the area’s population density, the offensive on Idlib governorate and its vicinity constitutes a different case as dozens of residents were displaced from their hometowns in Eastern Ghouta, Daraa, northern suburbs of Homs, and other areas and settled there, which raised the population to approximately 3.8 million people. The majority of the area’s population refuses going bac to Syrian regime-held areas fearing a fate of death, arrest,
enforced-disappearance, and looting. As the Syrian-Turkish borders are still shut, those people were left with one choice – to grapple with death in light of the utter idleness of the Security Council towards all that is happening as if it is merely a car accident.

The report documents a bombing by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian that targeted al Shamali al Gharbi neighborhood in Urm al Kubra village, western suburbs of Aleppo. The attack resulted in the killing of 36 civilians, including 20 children and seven women (adult female).

As of this writing, this massacre and other attacks by the Syrian regime on the suburbs of Aleppo and Hama governorates, as well as Idlib governorate, have resulted in the killing of 106 civilians since August 10, 2018, including 29 children, 13 women (adult female), and one unborn fetus. The attack also created a state of panic among residents who started fleeing. Since August 10, 2018, no less than 48,000 civilians have fled the villages of al Tah, Tahtaya, and la Khwyein in southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. Most of those live now in IDPs and shelters that alarmingly lack the most basic services. We’ve documented that not only has the Syrian regime targeted IDPs camps repeatedly but also displacement routes and convey. SNHR can conform that there are no equipped shelters that could take those IDPs in case they were deliberately targeted by the Syrian regime, and given its criminal record in this regard, we are fearing for the fate of the IDPs and we demand that UN peace-keeping forces enter the are to protect them, as the international community is expected to demonstrate a true seriousness regarding protecting millions of civilians who are trapped in north Syria and apply more pressure on the Russian-Syrian alliance to prevent the reoccurrence of the horrifying scenario that has already taken place in both Eastern Ghouta and south Syria.

**Methodology**

In the course of the ongoing monitoring for incidents and developments by SNHR team through a wide network including tens of various sources that have been built over an accumulation of extensive relations since the start of our work. When we receive information, or hear some news about a violation via the internet or media outlets, we work on following-up on this news and try to verify and collect evidences and data. In some cases, the researcher is able to visit the incident location at the soonest. However, this is a rarity in light of the incredibly high security risks, and given the frequency of daily incidents and in light of the human and material resources at hand. Therefore, the possibility to access evidences vary from one case to another, and, hence, the degree of its classification. Usually, what we do, at SNHR, in such cases is relying on accounts from survivors who experience the violation
firsthand, where we try to access those directly, and, to a second degree, who saw or filmed the violation, in addition to analyzing available materials from open sources such as the internet and media outlets. Thirdly, we try to speak to medical personnel who treated the wounded, assessed the symptoms, and determined the cause of death. Please see the methodology adopted by SNHR for documenting victims and classifying vital civilian facilities.

We were able to speak to a number of victims’ families and eyewitnesses. This report contains five accounts for paramedics, local activists, victims’ relatives, and central signal operators.

All the accounts were collected by speaking directly to the eyewitnesses and are not cited from any open sources. We have explained the purpose of these interviews for the eyewitnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without offering or giving them any incentives.

Also, SNHR has tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible, and guarantees were given to conceal the identity of any witness who preferred to use an alias.

The investigations included in this report have proved that the targeted areas were civilian areas where no military bases of armories for armed opposition factions or extremist Islamic groups were found during or even before the attack. Also, Russian forces never alerted civilians prior to the attack as required by the international humanitarian law. Also, Russian forces didn’t alert the civilians prior to the attack as required by the international humanitarian law. SNHR has analyzed the videos and pictures posted online or sent by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media. Some videos posted by activists show the site of the attacks, the dead bodies, the injured, and the large destruction in the aftermath of the bombardment.

This report only covers the bare minimum, which we have been able to document. It doesn’t also cover the social, economic, mental, and demographic ramifications and damages.

SNHR has taken it upon itself to diligently track the violations perpetrated by the Russian-Syrian alliance forces in de-escalation zones from May 2017, when the agreement went into force, until August 2018. The following link contains a database for a large number of incidents that involved these violations.

https://goo.gl/du7EHY

1 A network for picking up warplanes’ radio signals and tracking communications between the pilot and the airbase from which they took off.
South Syria Torn between a Grim Fate of Forced Displacement and Starvation or an Almost Certain Death by Falling Back into Syrian Regime’s Control

July 31, 2018

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January 14, 2018

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Russian Forces Perpetrated a Huge Massacre in a De-Escalation Zone

December 22, 2017

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The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the...

November 27, 2017

146 Civilians Killed, including 37 Children, in less than Two Weeks SNHR has released a report entitled: “The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta...

The Syrian-Russian Alliance Completely Shatters Astana Agreements in Idlib

September 30, 2017

Excessive, Deliberate Bombing of Tens of Civilian Facilities and Faction at Astana in One Week SNHR has released a report entitled: “The Syrian-Russian Alliance Completely...

75 Breaches in the First Month of the De-Escalation Agreement, 108...

June 17, 2017

The Lowest Month in Terms of Breaches since March 2011 SNHR has released a report in which it documents the most notable breaches to the...
II. Urm al Kubra Village Attack

Details
Friday, August 10, 2018, between 18:31 and 18:52, fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian carried out three attacks in which no less than eight highly-explosive missiles were used. The airstrikes targeted a residential area in northwestern Urm al Kubra village. The bombing resulted in the killing of 36 civilians, including 20 children and seven women (adult female). Additionally, no less than 45 others were wounded, while 25 residential buildings at least were completely destroyed.
All of the eyewitnesses have confirmed that two fixed-wing warplanes soared over Urm al Kubra village before the airstrike. Based on our experience in documenting past incidents, one warplane usually carries out the attack while the second takes care of other tasks. Two of the eyewitnesses, who are residents of the village, confirmed that this was the case. One account for a central signal operator, however, noted that the attack on Urm al Kubra village involved multiple airstrikes that were carried out by both warplanes.

Mohammad Bakkour, a central signal operator, was contacted by SNHR\(^2\). Mohammad said that he observed two fixed-wing Russian forces warplanes taking off from Hmeimi Airbase at 18:31. The warplanes headed east, passing through Khan Sheikhoun city, then Jarjanaz town, and then al Ekarda area, before entering the atmosphere of Aleppo governorate, “The first warplane carried out an airstrike using six missiles at once that targeted an area of residential buildings in Urm al Kubra village around 18:37, followed by a second airstrike by the second warplane that fired six missiles on three waves. This was around 18:52.”

We recorded that Russian forces deliberately carry out consecutive attacks in past massacres in order to kill as many civilians as possible. This massacre was no different, as the consecutive attacks killed a number of individuals, including people who came to aid the victims of the first attack.

Mahmoud Aziza is a local media worker and father of the media worker Ahmad Aziza who was killed in the attack. Mahmoud told SNHR\(^3\) how his brother was killed, “I experienced a feeling of uneasiness in my heart when I learned of the attack. I didn’t know I lost my son in that massacre. One of Ahmad’s friends who was with him told me that Ahmad went to aid the injured after the first airstrike. He carried an injured girl and started running when the warplanes targeted the same area with a number of missiles. Ahmad and the little girl were killed while his friend was injured.”

SNHR contacted Mohammad Jamil\(^4\), a volunteer with the Syrian civil defense in Urm al Kubra village. Mohammad was at his house when the attack took place. He said that he counted three airstrikes the observatories said that they were Russian, “I headed for the attack site. I was shocked by the large number of victims, most of them were children and women. The size of the destruction was huge and extended as long as three streets.” Mohammad said that dozens of wounded were trapped under the rubble and

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\(^2\) We contacted him via WhatsApp on August 19, 2018
\(^3\) We contacted him via WhatsApp on August 12, 2018
\(^4\) We contacted him via WhatsApp on August 12, 2018
that it took several hours to pull them out, “After four hours of continuous work, we were able to pull out two children who were trapped in the rubble. Your body stands still in shock of the whole tragedy, but the screams of the wounded wake you up to keep working.” Mohammad added that the targeted area was a residential area that is devoid of any military aspects or armories for armed opposition factions.

Hasan Badwi⁵ is the director of the civil defense in the village. He told SNHR that he heard the warnings of the central signal operators about two fixed-wing warplanes flying towards the village. One of the two warplanes bombed the village, while the second one was soaring in the sky without carrying out any airstrikes. He told is that he went with his team towards the targeted place. Two attacks took place before they had arrived, “I feared that the team might be targeted of we got any closer, so we waited until warplanes left. We started moving again to the targeted place. We’ve never seen anything like that before. It felt like that the entire village was razed. The missiles flattened over 25 houses, and entire families were buried in the rubble. We counted 35 victims, and about 70 others who were wounded.” Hasan confirmed that the village is completely devoid of any military bases or extremist factions, and that it is not a place sed to fire shells towards Syrian regime forces' areas of control.

⁵ We contacted him via WhatsApp on August 11, 2018
SNHR contacted the local media activist Rami al Sayyed⁶. Rami was about 10km away from the attack site, as he headed there after he heard the warnings from the observatories, “When I heard to the targeted place, the Russian warplanes had already carried out three airstrikes. I saw dozens of dead bodies laid on the ground, most of them were children. Civil defense teams was there yet at the time, so we started trying to save anyone we can. I saw an elder crying bitterly after he lost his last living child in the massacre. He told me that the lost his two other children in a previous attack.” Rami added that the bombardment damaged around 28 residential buildings, some of them were destroyed completely.

III. Appendixes and Attachments

Victims’ names

⁶ We contacted him via WhatsApp on August 12, 2018
Destruction in the aftermath of an air attack carried out by two fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on Urm al Kubra village – August 10, 2018

Pictures of victims killed in an attack by two fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on Urm al Kubra village, western suburbs of Aleppo – August 10, 2018

An aerial recording showing the destruction in al Shamali al Gharbi neighborhood in Urm al Kubra village in the aftermath of an attack we believe was Russian – August 10, 2018

A video showing a man mourning his son who was killed in an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on a residential neighborhood in northwestern Urm al Kubra village, western suburbs of Aleppo – August 10, 2018

Videos showing civil defense teams pulling out the victims in the aftermath of an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on a residential neighborhood in northwestern Urm al Kubra village, western suburbs of Aleppo – August 10, 2018

A video showing dead bodies in the aftermath of an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on a residential neighborhood in northwestern Urm al Kubra village, western suburbs of Aleppo – August 10, 2018

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Legal conclusions
1. The Russian regime has, beyond any doubt, violated Security Council Resolutions 2139 and 2254 which both state that indiscriminate attacks must be ceased. Also, the Russian regime has violated, through the crime of willful killing, Articles 7 and 8 of Rome Statue, which constitutes war crimes and crimes against humanity.
2. We can confirm that the bombardment mentioned in this report has targeted defenseless civilians. Therefore, Russian forces have violated the rules of the customary international humanitarian law, which protect the right to life. In addition, the bombardment was carried out in a non-international armed conflict, which constitutes a war crime as all elements have been fulfilled.
3. The attacks included in this report, which were carried out by Russian warplanes, constitute a violation to the customary international humanitarian law as shells were directed at populated residential areas rather than a specific military object.
4. The bombardments have resulted in collateral damages that involved casualties, injuries, or significant damages to civilian objects. There are strong indicators that compel to believe that the damage was too excessive compared to the anticipated military advantage.
5. The attacks carried out by Russian forces constitute a violation to the de-escalation agreement through bombing areas held by factions from the armed opposition. This strips the path and agreements of Geneva of any meaning and strengthens al Nussra Front at the expense of those factions.

**Recommendations**

**Security Council**

• The Security Council should take additional steps after Resolution 2139 was adopted, and no pledges to cease the indiscriminate bombardments have been made. All parties to the conflict should respect those steps and adhere to the rules of the international humanitarian law.
• 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 security and peace in Syria and implement the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ norm in order to preserve the Syrians’ lives, heritage, and arts from being destroyed, looted, and tainted.
• Expand sanction to include the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian regimes who have been directly involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Syrian people.

**OHCHR**

• The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other UN Organs on this massacre in particular and the ones preceding it seeing that they are glaring marks in a string of daily, sporadic massacres of smaller scale. The OHCHR should also work on implementing the recommendations included in this report.

**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.

**European Union and United States of America**

- Support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) that was established in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 71/248, adopted on December 21, 2016. And establish local tribunals that enjoy a universal jurisdiction, and address the war crimes that were perpetrated in Syria.

**UN special envoy to Syria**

- Condemn the perpetrators of crimes and massacres who were primarily responsible for dooming de-escalation agreements, effectively shattering and ending the entire political process and hold the Syrian-Russian alliance fully responsible for this.
- Disclose to the Syrian people Russia’s intentions to completely take control of the Syrian lands by force and its explicit desire to rehabilitate the present Syrian regime, which means formulating a political solution that suits its interests.

**Russian regime**

- Cease all patterns of war crimes in Syria.
- Reconstruct what has been destroyed by Russia’s machine of war.
- Compensate the victims materially and morally, and issue a public apology.
- Stop supporting war crimes and crimes against humanity which the Syrian regime has been perpetrating for eight years. This constitutes a direct implication in these crimes.
- Contribute to aiding the displaced who were forced out of their homes in Damascus suburbs’ Eastern Ghouta and Homs and Daraa governorates by Russia’s machine of war, and protect the remaining residents from the Syrian regime’s and Iranian militias’ arrest, abduction, and enforced-disappearance practices.

**Acknowledgment and Condolences**

Out most heartfelt gratitude and condolences to the residents and local activists in Urm al Kubra village who have effectively contributed to this report.