



Press release

Geneva: SNHR Participates in a Joint Side Event Between the Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Geneva, September 23, 2020: The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) recently participated in a joint online side event entitled 'Search and Investigating Cases of Enforced Disappearances', which took place on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the launch of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) and 10 years since the entry into force of the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

The event was organized by the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) and the WGEID on the margins of the 122nd session of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the 19th session of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, with the participation of the Special Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances Mr. Luciano Hazan, and members of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, the envoys of France and Japan to the United Nations, and a number of experts in forensic medicine, with the session chaired by Mr. Olivier de Frouville, a member of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances.

The objectives of the event included defining states' obligations to conduct effective search and investigations in cases of enforced disappearances, promoting the adoption of comprehensive domestic legal and policy frameworks for effective search and investigation, promoting the universal ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, and underlining the central importance of the complementary nature of the investigative work and searching for victims of enforced disappearances, and identifying recurring obstacles in law, policy and practice related to search and investigation.

The event also aimed to promote and illustrate the central role of enabling the effective participation of relatives and civil society organisations in the search and investigation processes, and to promote the implementation of the CED Guiding Principles for the Search for Disappeared Persons and the WGEID recommendations on effective investigations, in addition to strengthening stakeholders' commitment and mobilization to tackle impunity in the context of cases of enforced or involuntary disappearances.

Three of the speakers, Rainer Huhle, Maria Clara and Galvis Patiño, all of whom are former members of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, spoke about the principles of the Committee in the search for disappeared persons, while Mr. Luciano Hazan spoke about the Working Groups' report on standards and public policies for an effective investigation of enforced disappearances. In an address by Ms. Estela de Carlotto, the president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo Organization (Argentina), she spoke about her personal experience and expertise in investigations and searches to disclose the fate of the forcibly disappeared.

After these speakers, Commissioner Nimalka Fernando from the Sri Lanka's Office on Missing Persons, and Messrs Alicia Lusiardo and Carmen Osorno, forensic experts in the Forensic Committee (Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team EAAF – Mexico) delivered addresses, with the session being concluded by Mr. Bernard Duhaime, member of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, opened his speech by highlighting three main reasons that make the situation in Syria a complex one, the first of which is the huge number of forcibly disappeared persons in Syria, which reached nearly 99,000 individuals, indicating the magnitude of this record compared to the number of population, noting that 84,000 of them have been detained by the Syrian regime.

Secondly, he cited the continuous failure at the international and local levels to reveal the fate of these persons for nine years, with this being in parallel with the documentation of multiple deaths due to torture and atrocious detention conditions.

The third reason, he explained, is the continuing occurrence of cases of arbitrary arrest in Syria to date, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights database, nearly 80% of them ultimately classified as enforced disappearances, pointing out that arrests are more similar in form to abductions, as the gunmen who carry out these raids don't identify themselves or the party to which they belong, while the arrests themselves take place without any judicial warrant, with the detainee being prevented from communicating with their families or appointing lawyers.

Abdul Ghany talked about the difficulties and challenges facing the processes of documenting cases of enforced disappearance, and suggested that the greatest of these is the disappointment and hopelessness felt by the families of the disappeared, which has led to their being reluctant to cooperate in documenting the disappearance of their loved ones.

The SNHR's Chairman also explained that the other parties to the conflict have also practiced enforced disappearance similar to the Syrian regime; Abdul Ghany also expressed concern about the fate of more than 8,600 Syrian citizens who had been arrested by ISIS and are still forcibly disappeared despite the fact that ISIS has almost been vanquished since March 2019, pointing out the absence of any serious work to reveal their fate.

In addition, the SNHR founder noted the continuing cooperation and coordination since 2011 between the United Nations Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

Abdul Ghany concluded his statement by stressing that there can be no hope of any political solution and stability without a radical solution to the dilemma of enforced disappearance, emphasizing the importance of supporting the families of the disappeared in logistical, moral and financial terms in order to help them to continue their struggle to disclose the fate of their loved ones and hold accountable those involved in their disappearance and torture.

The following is the full text of the statement:

Geneva: Statement delivered by Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, at a side event held jointly by the Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Thanks for the invitation to this important event,

At the beginning of my speech, I would like to emphasize that we at the Syrian Network for Human Rights greatly appreciate the work of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and that we and this Group have enjoyed a cooperative relationship since 2011, and we're currently dealing with about 650 new enforced disappearance cases which have been documented, and will provide the UN Working Group with their data in the coming weeks; we also immensely appreciate the Group's informing us of the Syrian government's response and any developments in the cases, and do our part in informing the families of the individuals involved about this response.

On this occasion, I would like to remind everyone that Syria is an exceptionally complex situation among the countries of the world for three primary reasons:

First: The huge numbers of forcibly disappeared persons. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights database, nearly 99,000 of the individuals detained in Syria, between March 2011 and September 2020 are still classified as forcibly disappeared, including nearly 84,000 disappeared by the Syrian regime; this is an alarming, indeed a terrifying, number compared to the country's total population, affecting millions of Syrians, and destroying society.

Second: The complete failure of those responsible to reveal the fate of these people for nine years, in parallel with the documentation of multiple deaths due to torture and atrocious detention conditions.

Third: Arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances continue to take place to date, with more than 80% of arrests in Syria ultimately classified as enforced disappearances. We use the term 'arrest' loosely in this context, with arrests being more similar in form to abductions, as the gunmen who carry out these raids don't identify themselves or the party to which they belong, while the arrests themselves take place without any judicial warrant, official order or judicial documentation being presented to justify them. From the moment of their arrest, detainees are isolated from the outside world and prevented from communicating with their families or appointing lawyers.

As a result of all of the above factors, many families have lost faith in the usefulness of documenting the cases of their detained and disappeared sons or other loved ones, with this loss of trust being one of the greatest challenges that we face, including the security challenges, since without the cooperation of families, we cannot continue our work, and convincing the people in Syria to cooperate with us is very difficult when we cannot give them any hope, or any information about the fate of their children.

The other parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria, such as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, ISIS and the various Armed Opposition factions, and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, have all practiced enforced disappearances similar to the Syrian regime, albeit to a lesser degree and in a less systematic manner than that of the regime's forces.

For example, what is the fate of more than 8,600 Syrian citizens forcibly disappeared by ISIS? While we all know that ISIS has almost been vanquished since March 2019, no-one knows anything about these disappeared people, and no serious work is being done to reveal their fate in those areas they previously controlled.

In addition to all of the aforementioned challenges, the families of the forcibly disappeared suffer from the predations of various networks of fraud and deception which feed on and profit from the suffering of the forcibly disappeared persons and their loved ones, and mislead the desperately worried families into believing that they can obtain information about their relatives whilst in reality simply exploiting their suffering in exchange for payment, with their information being often wrong.

We also fear that some of the forcibly disappeared people will be tried arbitrarily through illegal courts, such as the Counter-Terrorism Court, which is an exceptional court that does not meet any of the most fundamental standards of a fair trial and whose rulings are not published; meanwhile, the detained or disappeared selected to be tried in this court may be imprisoned for years before being subjected to trial, while referrals to this court are made by regime security branches; despite its grandiose title, this kangaroo court is, in fact, a security branch, whose pre-decided objective is to sentence those appearing before it to between 20 and 30 years imprisonment or the death penalty in order to dispose of the forcibly disappeared citizens who demanded freedom and an end to the hereditary rule of the Assad family.

In the same context, more than 14,400 persons have been killed in Syria to date since 2011 due to torture, with nearly 98% of this number being killed at the hands of the Syrian regime, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights' database, and we still receive regular reports of deaths due to torture up to the present day.

Torture and enforced disappearance in Syria constitute crimes against humanity. This is not an aberration but a state policy, on which a number of institutions work in coordination with each other, namely the security services, hospitals, the army.

Accordingly, **I make the following recommendations:**

- Crimes against humanity require urgent action. Immediate access must be granted to all detention centers in Syria, and pressure must be imposed on the Syrian regime to publish the lists of the detainees held in its many prisons. If this does not happen, we will face the death of more forcibly disappeared persons, and the arrest and disappearance of more Syrian citizens.

- There will be no success for any political solution and there can be no stability without a radical solution to the dilemma of enforced disappearance in Syria, since this extends over all governorates, with the only 'crime' of most of the forcibly disappeared being to demand their most fundamental rights, represented by the demand for changing the government, holding free and independent elections, and moving from dictatorship towards pluralism; a real solution must be introduced according to a strict timetable that ends their suffering in order to achieve any kind of stability in society.
- Finally, there are many associations representing the families of the forcibly disappeared and local human rights organizations working on this critical issue. These associations for the families of the forcibly disappeared must be supported logistically, morally and financially in order to continue their struggle to disclose the fate of their loved ones and hold accountable those involved in their torture and disappearance.

To view the full event, please [visit this link](#).

To view Mr. Abdul Ghany statement, [please visit this link](#).

