



## Statement

### **SNHR Organized an Event on Violations against Children in Syria, with Participants Including International and United Nations Experts**

On Friday, January 22, 2021, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) organized an event, sponsored by Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, on SNHR's Ninth Annual Report on Violations against Children in Syria, which was broadcast on the Zoom platform and the SNHR's official accounts on social media platforms, with participants including:

Mr. Martin Leeser, Syria team, the German Embassy in Beirut; Dr. Troels Gauslå Engell, Senior Stabilisation Advisor on Syria to the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ms. Paula Sastrowijoto, Deputy Syria Envoy, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ms. Lina Biscaia, Senior Legal Officer, Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes and Crimes against Children Unit, United Nations Investigative Team for Accountability of Da'esh/ISIL; Mr. Javier Perez Salmeron, Justice Rapid Response Child Rights Expert Roster, former Child Rights Advisor to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syria Arab Republic; Professor Diane Marie Amann, Emily & Ernest Woodruff Chair in International Law and Faculty Co-Director of the Dean Rusk International Law Center, University of Georgia School of Law; and Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman, Syrian Network for Human Rights. The session was moderated by Ms. Valentina Falco, Team Leader - Child Protection, United Nations Department of Peace Operations, and former chief investigator at the International Commission of Inquiry in Syria.

**The event focused on answering the following main questions:**

- What is the role of grave violations against children in the broader strategy of warring parties in Syria? How to situate these violations in the overall trajectory of the Syrian conflict over the past ten years?
- What type of support can be provided to children and their families?
- What are the overall impact and long-term effects of these violations on Syria's children and on the Syrian society as a whole? And what are their implications for the political process and the overall stability and security of the country?
- Why has the international community failed to take any action to end violations of children's rights thus far, despite their appalling scale and gravity?
- In addition to political and economic sanctions, and criminal cases filed under the principle of universal jurisdiction, which other tools are available to pressure the Syrian regime and all parties to the conflict in Syria to end the atrocious violations against children documented in the SNHR report? How to foster effective accountability for these violations? And what is the role Syrian and international organizations can play?

Ms. Falco began the session by thanking the Syrian Network for Human Rights and the countries sponsoring the event, namely Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands, for organizing the event. In her opening address, she said: **“The Ninth Annual Report on Violations against Children in Syria released by the Syrian Network for Human Rights tells us, or rather screams, that across Syria, children continue to be tortured, killed, maimed, arbitrarily detained, forcibly displaced, and deprived of their most basic rights to health, education and to a safe home, on a scale that should shock the consciousness of mankind, and that instead seems to go increasingly and tragically unnoticed.”**

The next speaker was Mr. Martin Leeser, who noted that the topic of the event **“in a more human and more just world should never exist,”** condemning **“the unfathomable suffering of children, as a result of war, the oppression and cynical machinations of the regime, and of other national and international parties to the conflict, and, yes, the failure of the international community as well to put an end to that conflict as we approach the tenth anniversary of its outbreak.”** He lauded SNHR’s work, saying, **“The Syrian Network for Human Rights is a long-standing partner, a much-cherished source of insights that inform our own reporting, and that feed into our own policy-making process.”** He added, **“SNHR conducts the most valuable research and documentation, and also serves as a basis for accountability and for transitional justice, which is key to overcoming conflict and building a sustainable peace; the German and also the European Union position in this regard is very well established; all perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held accountable, and, as we have said many times, promoting accountability, justice and combating impunity remains a high priority and a fundamental part of any future process of national reconciliation in Syria.”**

Mr. Leeser concluded by saying, **“Behind every individual case, of course, stands a young life destroyed; I want to make one point very clear, which is that Syria and the plight of its children have not been forgotten and that we are not indifferent.”**

Mr. Leeser’s speech was followed by Dr. Troels Gauslå Engell’s, who began by saying, **“We are very proud to have a close and strategic partnership with the Syrian Network for Human Rights because the work the SNHR does is crucial for shedding light on human rights violations in Syria no matter who the perpetrator was.”** He continued, **“SNHR has produced its ninth report on the rights of Syrian children, and again we are reminded of the unacceptable situation; children are regularly killed as a result of military action, and they are arbitrarily detained or even forcefully conscripted; children have been tortured, and I would add that depriving children of access to education, to clean water, and healthy food, to a safe home, that all this hits children particularly hard. Growing up in the Syrian conflict marks generations for life, probably only making it harder to bring about a stable future for Syria.”** Dr. Troels emphasized, **“There’s too much at stake, first and foremost, the future of the children themselves, and the future of Syria and the stability of the region also depend on the future of children. So, it is imperative that people continue to assist children in need, that they continue to work to deter further violations against children, and that they continue to work so that one day it will be possible to hold accountable those who violate the rights of the children.”**

The third address came from Ms. Paula Sastrowijoto, in which she pointed out that, **“Accountability is one of the priorities of Dutch foreign policy and human rights policy. The Netherlands has been working for years to combat impunity and gross violations, including torture by the regime, which cannot go unpunished. We need to establish justice for victims, all the victims, and children above all.”** She added, **“Over the years, we have been supporting NGOs and the ILM in the field of documentation, but we felt that this was not enough at the time. So, that’s why we decided in September of last year to hold Syria to account under international law for gross violations of human rights, and torture in particular.”** She further noted, **“The report of today shows the severity of the situation, and we see a regime that will not stop at anything to bomb its people and to kill its children; the numbers are staggering.”** She concluded by appealing to the world’s nations to **“hold Syria to account under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”**

This was followed by the Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany’s address, in which he began by thanking Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands for their sponsorship of the event and their support for the work of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, as well as their interest in advocating human rights in Syria, and indicated that children in Syria have been subjected to the same various, harrowing types of violations that adults have been subjected to, by all parties. Not only that, he added, but these violations have been widespread, with some of them targeting children specifically because they are children. He also underlined the centrality of the issue of documenting crimes against children in the work of the Syrian Network for Human Rights and its database, emphasizing that these are specifically referred to in all reports, statements and news items issued by SNHR, as well as noting the organization’s close cooperation with the UNICEF Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM).

Mr. Abdul Ghany concluded by saying, **“This massive amount of gross violations that children have been subjected to simply shows the reality of the circumstances they have been through over the past decade. We cannot really know the implications of these psychological and social conditions, and I would like to say that the impact does not include the child victim alone, rather it extends to his friends, as they are directly or indirectly affected by the disability, displacement, killing or disappearance of their friend, and some of these children have become adult men and women and have carried their suffering and repercussions on their lives and future. The blockage of their horizon, loss of hope, and frightening spread of illiteracy, homelessness, and the loss of a father or family, all of this builds a fertile environment for the ideological and sexual abuse and exploitation of children by many parties, especially the Iranian militias, pro-Syrian regime militias, and extremist organizations.”** He also stressed that **“Some violations amount to crimes against humanity, which require international intervention to stop them.”**

In the address by the next speaker, Ms. Lina Biscaia, she spoke about the role that violations against children have played in the overall military strategy and modus operandi of the parties to the conflict, and how to situate these violations in the overall trajectory of the Syrian conflict over the past ten years. As Ms. Biscaia explained, **“Those violations have changed across time and mostly have changed as the conflict has evolved, depending on the time at which they took place, depending on the perpetrator and depending on the gender of the victim.”** She concluded by recalling the six main violations: **“The six [most] grave violations we have seen since 2011 are killing and maiming, the use of child soldiers - we’ve seen it from the side of the government since 2013, and from the armed groups since 2012 - sexual violence against girls - we saw it particularly during 2011, 2012 and 2013 during those ground operations where girls were very vulnerable to being attacked, and then, of course, we had ISIL particularly in the period 2014 to 2017, and as Fadel Abdul Ghany mentioned, abductions leading to either forced conscription or arrests going on almost since the beginning of the conflict. I just want to point out that armed groups have used women and children as hostages, with the specific purpose of exchanging them for the corpses of Syrian government soldiers, so this is a very particular pattern to armed groups. The last two violations are the attacks on schools and hospitals and the denial of humanitarian aid. I think we saw it mostly during sieges mostly by the pro-government forces, as a way to force the population to surrender and it was extremely successful.”**

The next speaker, Mr. Javier Perez Salmeron, focused on the impact of a conflict of such staggering proportions on generations of children, on their communities and on the country as a whole, noting **“the deep impact on the mental health and psychological wellbeing of children, not just children, but on the wellbeing of their caregivers, their parents and community as a whole.”** He concluded by saying that **“If we work on re-establishing a protective environment for children, and if we prioritize this approach of children as right holders, I think there is hope for Syrian children.”**

This was followed by Professor Diane Marie Amann’s address, in which she pointed out that **“conduct is occurring that constitutes both systematic violations of human rights in many different sectors as well as international crimes as articulated in the statutes of multiple tribunals and recognized as customary international law.”** She talked about how to turn these facts into avenues for accountability, and in this regard, she indicated that the report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights **“is itself an aspect of accountability, and we should never lose sight of the fact that documentation of misdoing, the publication of that documentation, cooperation with other groups, various investigation mechanisms, etc. is itself a way of holding individuals accountable, not before a court of law, but before a court of**

**public opinion, and that is not insignificant.” She concluded her address by noting that, “Syria, in particular, belongs not only to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and two of its optional protocols, as mentioned in the report, but it also belongs to the Convention against Discrimination against Women, the Disabilities Convention, the Convention against Torture, both of the International Covenants, all of which have provisions that are implicated by what we have seen in this report, all of which have treaty bodies that require periodic reporting, some of which allow individual communications. So we should look to all these avenues to try to continue to raise consciousness about what is happening and to seek from those authoritative treaty bodies, their articulations, their findings confirming what we’re seeing in reports like this.”**

The event concluded with many questions and interactive discussion. You can listen to the full contents of the event via the [following link on our YouTube channel](#).