

Press release

Geneva: SNHR participates in a high-level side event at the UN Human Rights Council HQ on the issue of detainees and torture in Syria

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Tuesday, March 3, 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.



Geneva, February 24, 2020: The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), in coordination and cooperation with Human Rights Watch, organized a high-level side event at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Headquarters in Geneva entitled 'DETAINEES AND TORTURE IN SYRIA' during the opening of the UNHRC's forty-third session. The event was held under the auspices of Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, Canada, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands and Finland, and with the participation of five foreign ministers representing Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, Liechtenstein and Finland, and attended by a large number of foreign delegates, representatives of international organizations and envoys of several other countries.

In general, the Ministers' statements emphasized the grave and continuing nature of torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers, stressing the need for accountability for these pervasive torture violations against detainees; in most of their statements, they demanded that unconditional access be provided to all of the Syrian regime's detention centers, with a number of ministers also referring to the seriousness of the humanitarian situation in Idlib.

Ms. Soumaia Alolabi, a survivor of arrest and torture, also spoke about the torture she witnessed and experienced at the hands of the Syrian regime's forces and security services.

Mr. Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, opened his statement by recalling what is happening in northwest Syria, reiterating a fundamental question, namely, why do 95% of the population of cities and towns in Syria flee to the open air and camps, leaving behind their homes and possessions when Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias advance towards these areas, despite the bitter cold and terrible conditions, and why don't they return after Syrian Regime forces take control of their areas? Mr. Abdul Ghany explained that the refugees and IDPs who return to areas under the control of the Syrian regime face arrests, enforced disappearances, torture and forced conscription into the ranks of the Syrian regime's forces. This was detailed in a previous report issued by the SNHR.



Returning to the issue of torture, Abdul Ghany emphasized that arrests are still taking place in Syria. According to the SNHR database, at least 129,973 individuals are still detained or forcibly disappeared by Syrian Regime forces since the outbreak of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011 up to December 2019, with SNHR's estimates suggesting that almost 1.2 million Syrian citizens have been arrested and detained at some point. Abdul Ghany further noted that while the Syrian regime is by far the most prolific perpetrator of torture, all parties to the conflict have practiced torture in their detention centers. In a previous report, SNHR classified the torture methods used by the regime into eight main categories, with each sub-type consisting of several secondary methods, constituting a total of 80 methods of torture practiced in the Syrian regime's detention centers. Abdul Ghany also emphasized that a detainee may be subjected to a variety of torture methods during a single torture session, adding that SNHR has documented the deaths of at least 14,183 individuals due to torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers between March 2011 and January 31, 2020, and that deaths in detention continue to occur in near-total secrecy, and the Syrian regime does not deliver any bodies, with the fate of the bodies of tens of thousands of detainees killed in this way still unknown.

Although Syria's government ratified the Convention against Torture in 2004, the Syrian regime's practices of torture amount to crimes against humanity, having been practiced systematically against tens of thousands of Syrians, and amounting to extermination. On the screen, Abdul Ghany displayed portraits created by the SNHR demonstrating the torture positions practiced against detainees.

Abdul Ghany pointed out that the amnesty decrees issued by the Syrian regime are a sham, applying exclusively to those whom the authorities want to release, adding that the arrests are still continuing to take place after the last amnesty decree issued in mid-September 2019; the SNHR has documented at least 442 cases of arrest, and 93 deaths due to torture since mid-September 2019 up until January 31, 2020.

Abdul Ghany stressed the need for international organizations to have unconditional access to all detention centers in Syria, saying, **“The Syrian people have the right to help from the rest of the world's states that have ratified the Geneva Conventions and the Convention against Torture in ensuring that the Syrian regime respects the implementation of the Geneva Conventions.”** He also called on all those states which are parties to the Convention against Torture to take the necessary measures to enforce their jurisdiction over perpetrators of torture and to make all the necessary material and security efforts for this objective.



Abdul Ghany recommended that the High Commissioner for Human Rights should issue frequent reports and statements of condemnation on this sensitive issue, also calling on the Human Rights Council to allocate a special session to discuss the crimes of torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers, which he noted has reached a level of monstrous depravity never witnessed in modern times, stressing the need for the Syrian regime to stop violating the Syrian constitution and international law in such horrific and evil ways, which grotesquely insult the Syrian state.

The SNHR had issued many reports on this critical issue, and participated in several international events in this regard; this high-level event sends a clear message about the centrality and importance of the issue of torture, highlighting the atrocious conditions suffered by detainees, and emphasizing the need for monitoring and action on this issue in order to achieve progress in this sensitive matter, and for international affirmation of the vital nature of the process of accountability and the prevention of impunity.

The following is the full text of the statement:

Geneva: The statement delivered by Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, at a high-level event at the headquarters of the UN Human Rights Council on the issue of detainees and torture in Syria

Thank you very much for the kind invitation, thank you to the organizers, to the honorable attendees,

Before I begin my speech on this important issue, I would like to explain what is happening in northwest Syria; there are two fundamental points:

The first: Why do more than 95% of the population of cities and towns flee, leaving behind their homes and possessions when Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias advance towards these areas, despite the bitter cold and terrible conditions?

The second basic question is why don't they return?

In a previous report, we revealed the fate of refugees and IDPs who return to the areas under the Syrian regime's control, including arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and forced conscription into the ranks of the Syrian regime's forces.



Another issue is the magnitude of the unlimited and intensive violations that Russia has perpetrated as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a position which gives it near-total impunity and opens the way for it to commit war crimes, including bombing medical facilities and schools; this requires a strong reaction by those countries that care about international law, because what Russia has been doing is a threat to both local and global security and peace and to international law.

Moving to the issue of torture in Syria, I would like to refer to three main points:

First: The detentions are still ongoing, and we can say with certainty that every detainee is subjected to at least one type of torture. According to the SNHR database, at least 129,973 individuals are still detained or forcibly disappeared by the Syrian regime since the outbreak of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011 up to December 2019, with our estimates suggesting that almost 1.2 million Syrian citizens have been arrested and detained at some point.

We use the term 'detention' loosely in this context because in most countries an arrest has legal limitations that are completely missing with the Syrian regime, whose arrests are more similar in form to abductions by mafia gangs than to any legal procedure; for the regime, arrest begins with a group of armed men, often affiliated with the security services, wearing military or civilian uniforms, breaking into a house or raiding a workplace or public place, or detaining the victims at a checkpoint, with arrests carried out without presenting any arrest warrant, official order or judicial documentation for the arrest. These armed men refuse to reveal their names or identities or to give any information about their affiliations or which security service or official body they represent. This abduction is usually accompanied by the use of excessive violence, physical and verbal abuse, using both to intimidate the detainee and other people in the area. From the moment of his or her arrest, the detainee is deprived of all legal and human rights and subjected to multiple forms of torture, as well as continuous fear over his or her unknown fate; a person detained in this way is simply deemed to have 'disappeared' in an Orwellian sense, with the ruling authorities denying all knowledge of his or her arrest or place of detention. The regime also forbids the majority of detainees (more than 90%) from communicating with their families or even informing them of the arrest. Detainees are also denied any opportunity to appoint a lawyer, meaning that almost 65 percent of those detained in this way by the Syrian regime are ultimately classified as forcibly disappeared.



Second: Throughout the years of our work, we've met with hundreds of survivors of detention; based on these meetings, the Syrian Network for Human Rights issued a report in September 2014 on the most notable torture methods used by the Syrian regime. In subsequent years, through talking to more survivors of detention or torture, we've been able to document a wider range of torture methods. Here it must be stressed that while the Syrian regime is by far the most prolific perpetrator of torture, all parties to the conflict have practiced torture in their detention centers.

SNHR has classified the torture procedures and methods used by the regime into eight main categories, with each sub-type consisting of several secondary methods, constituting a total of 80 methods of torture. While there may be other methods used, we have not yet been able to identify and document these. We always emphasize that a detainee may be subjected to a variety of torture methods during a single torture session. The eight basic patterns are:

- Physical torture: 41 methods
- Health neglect and conditions of detention: Six methods
- Sexual violence: Eight methods
- Psychological torture and humiliation of human dignity: 11 methods
- Forced labor
- Torture in military hospitals: 11 methods
- Separation
- Stages of execution

Furthermore, no month in all the years since 2011 has passed without us documenting dozens of deaths due to torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers, which is still continuing up to the present day. We documented the deaths of 14,183 individuals due to torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers between March 2011 and January 31, 2020.

Deaths in detention continue to occur in near-total secrecy, and the Syrian regime does not deliver any bodies, so we do not yet know the fate of the bodies of tens of thousands of detainees killed in this way.

Third: Although Syria's government ratified the Convention against Torture in 2004, the Syrian regime's practices of torture amount to crimes against humanity, having been practiced systematically against tens of thousands of Syrians, and amounting to extermination.



The terrible magnitude of the Syrian regime's arrests and torture leads invariably to the disintegration and destruction of society, with their effects being more pronounced on women, whether as direct victims of arrest and torture, or through losing their husbands or children as victims of arrest and torture, leaving many widowed with no family breadwinner.

Amnesty decrees:

Amnesty decrees issued by the Syrian regime are fake decrees, and none of them include those who participated in opposing the Syrian regime and contributed to the popular uprising. Since the recent amnesty decree issued in September 2019 to date, we documented at least 442 cases of arrest, and 93 deaths due to torture.

Recommendations:

The International Community

- Work on the need for international organizations to have unconditional access to all detention centers in Syria.
- The Syrian people have the right to help from the rest of the world's states that have ratified the Geneva Conventions and the Convention against Torture in ensuring that the Syrian regime respects the implementation of the Geneva Conventions.
- State parties to the Convention against Torture should take the necessary measures to establish their jurisdiction over perpetrators of torture and make all the necessary material and security efforts for this objective.
- Take serious punitive measures against the Syrian regime to deter it from continuing to kill Syrian citizens under torture, involving political, economic, and military measures, including no-fly zones.
- Provide more funds, support and sufficient grants to local organizations concerned with the care and rehabilitation of torture victims and their families.
- Provide support to individual activists and local organizations that document violations without imposing tutelage or political directives.
- Unite to implement the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law, by establishing a special criminal court to hold the Syrian regime accountable for crimes against humanity and war crimes it has committed, and take a clear, unanimous and repeated international consensus of not accepting that it continues to dominate the Syrian state.



OHCHR:

- Make greater efforts to combat and condemn systematic torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers, and issue periodic reports and repeated condemnation statements addressing this sensitive issue.
- Repeat its request that the Security Council refers the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

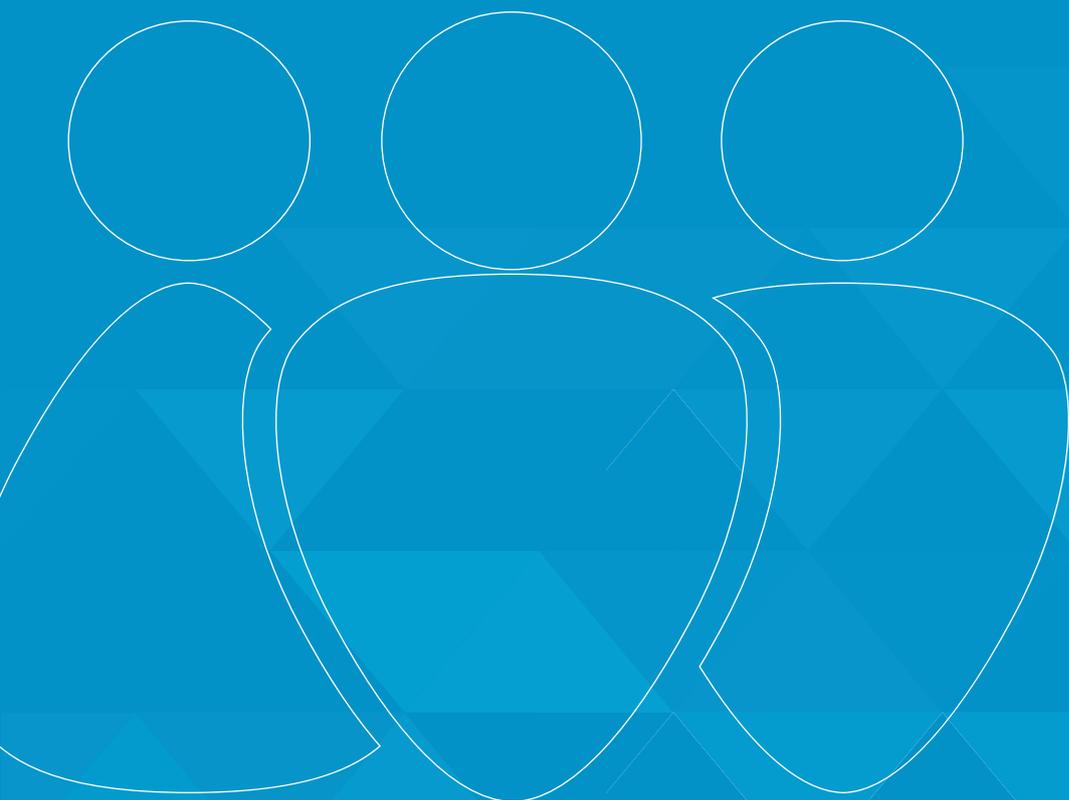
Human Rights Council

- Allocate a special session to discuss the crimes of torture in the Syrian regime's detention centers as it reached a level of ugliness never witnessed in modern times.

The Syrian regime:

- Stop violating the Syrian constitution and international law in a horrific and monstrous way, which grotesquely insults the Syrian constitution and the Syrian state.





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