

Statement delivered on behalf of all Special Procedures mandate-holders of the United Nations Human Rights Council at the Eighteenth Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic

Geneva, 2 December 2011

Statement delivered on video by the Chair of the Coordination Committee of Special Procedures, Ms. Farida Shaheed.

Madame President, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my capacity as Chair of the Coordination Committee of Special Procedures, I would like to deliver the following statement on behalf of the Special Procedures mandate-holders of the Human Rights Council.

At the second special session of the Human Rights Council held at the end of August, we again condemned in the strongest terms the unjustified repression of protesters and urged the Syrian authorities to immediately stop all acts of violence. Since then a number of Special Procedure mandate holders have made public statements as well as engaged on the issues in various ways.

Despite our repeated and unanimous calls to denounce the gravity of the human rights abuses occurring in Syria, we are dismayed that, in only three months, the number of deaths has doubled, increasing from 2,000 to some 4,000. Human rights violations have also led to important population displacements, both in terms of refugees who have had to seek protection in host countries, and internally displaced persons who remain extremely vulnerable inside the country. In our view, this is a particularly alarming affirmation that urgent action is needed. We address the Human Rights Council today, for the third time, to vigorously condemn the continuous and gross violations in Syria.

As the Government of Syria seemed to have approved the Action Plan led by the League of Arab States, we had hoped for an end to the violence. But again, the Government's commitments have not been followed through with action. Calls by the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have largely gone unheeded. Instead, the authorities have intensified the brutal repression against protesters and the civilian population.

Excessive force, including the alleged use of heavy artillery by the military, continues to be used against protesters and civilians, including a large number of children, in various areas of the country, but in particular in the city of Homs where horrific crimes have been reported. This has resulted in alarming numbers of reported extrajudicial executions and injuries, in a context of persisting impunity.

The same methods have been used to quash the voice of dissent. We are deeply concerned that tens of thousands have allegedly been arbitrarily arrested and detained in already overcrowded detention facilities and many have reportedly been subjected to torture and ill-treatment. Of equally grave concern are the reported cases of enforced disappearances, possibly in the thousands.

We also have information suggesting the unacceptable targeting of human rights defenders, journalists, and bloggers, including women, carrying out their legitimate activities whose rights to freedom of assembly and of expression continue to be denied. Many persons have been tried in violation of fair trial safeguards and their families have been harassed.

With an increasing number of army defectors taking up arms, concern has been expressed that the situation on the ground may evolve into a civil war; this would have even more destructive effects on the Syrian population, who has already suffered greatly and lost much. Only immediate and drastic change to ensure full respect for human rights can avoid further suffering. Increased repression only exacerbates the growing threat to peace and security.

We refer to reports indicating limited access to food, water, medical and other supplies, aggravated by areas being blockaded and attacks on medical staff. Some reports suggest that in certain areas, access to such essential goods has been deliberately blocked to punish those protesting and de facto all those living in these areas. Such tactics are in clear violation of human rights standards. In this context, we would like to stress that the international community has the duty to protect the civilian population and address its humanitarian needs. We therefore call for humanitarian access to the affected areas.

Madame President,

We deplore the fact that the Commission of Inquiry has not been granted access to the country. Establishing the facts and circumstances of the violations is critical and the first step towards ensuring accountability. An independent, thorough and prompt investigation into the alleged violations must be carried out. We urge the Syrian authorities to allow unrestricted access to the independent experts of the Commission of Inquiry and independent human rights monitors to the country.

Many of the human rights violations committed by the Syrian authorities are, without a doubt, of a systematic and widespread nature, amounting to crimes against humanity. Those responsible must be held to account. Adding our voice to that of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, we strongly encourage a referral by the Security Council of the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

We reiterate our commitment to work with all concerned actors to redress on-going and past violations, and to design appropriate legislative and policy responses. In this regard, we take note of the invitation extended to the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, and call for further and effective cooperation. We urge that requests for visits by other mandate holders are positively considered.

We deeply regret that the violence and suffering of the population have reached this stage and again express our solidarity with the Syrian people who have courageously expressed grievances and demands, which we believe are legitimate, for fuller enjoyment of their civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.

We appeal for the international community to be attentive to the human rights and humanitarian needs of the Syrian population and therefore call for the following action:

- The violence and repression must end immediately, and political detainees must be released in accordance with the agreed Plan of Action of the League of Arab States.
- All parties must refrain from violence.
- People on the ground must have access to basic necessities and safe access to medical facilities.
- Political measures must be taken to open the way for a credible Syrian-led process of comprehensive political, social and economic change that will address the democratic aspirations of the people and the fulfilment of their human rights.
- An independent, thorough and prompt investigation into the alleged violations must be carried out, and perpetrators of gross human rights violations must be held accountable.
- Victims and their families should obtain redress and appropriate compensation.

I thank you for your attention.