

**Human Rights Council  
18<sup>th</sup> Special Session**

**Human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic**

**Statement by  
Mr. Paulo Pinheiro  
Chairperson  
Independent International Commission of Inquiry  
on the Syrian Arab Republic**

**Geneva, 2 December 2011**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour to introduce today the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic mandated by the Human Rights Council. The report documents widespread and systematic violations of human rights committed by the Syrian military, security forces and pro-government militias since the beginning of the protests in March 2011. These violations include excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, violations of children rights and of economic and social rights.

Madame President,

The Commission began its investigation at the end of September and concluded the first part of its field work on 2 November. We interviewed 223 victims, witnesses and defectors from the military and security forces. Other interviews were conducted through Skype from Syria. We also reviewed video and photographic material. Thus, we collected a solid body of evidence, despite the fact that the Commission was not granted access to Syria.

At the outset of its work, the Commission sought to engage the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in dialogue. We repeatedly called for meetings and for access to the country. Regrettably, none of our requests was considered favourably.

Yet, the Commission strove to reflect the position of the Government, including existing policies and announced reforms expressed in public pronouncements and media reports.

Let me point out that a visit to the country would have allowed us to interact with Government officials and to ascertain the circumstances of the reported killing of 1,100 members of the military and security forces. We remain eager to reach out to their families and to wounded soldiers, as well as to suffering civilians across Syrian communities.

Excellencies,

The unrest has directly affected the lives of as many as three million Syrians. Many have been forced to seek refuge with families and friends. Thousands have fled the country. Violent strife continues unabated.

The Government claims that it has a responsibility to counter armed gangs, terrorists and foreign agents who are manipulating public discontent. It further claims that it has no policy to be harsh on civilians. The Commission is aware of acts of violence committed by some opponents of the Government and by members of the 'Free Syrian Army'. We are convinced, however, that peaceful civilians bore the brunt of the violence.

Virtually all victims and witnesses stated that one or more of their family members, neighbours or friends had been killed, wounded, arrested or tortured since the inception of the protests. Many were never seen again and remain unaccounted for.

Areas where wide-scale military operations were conducted endured the harshest conditions. When blockades were imposed, residents could not obtain water, food and other basic necessities. Military and security forces targeted residential water tanks and water pipes, while snipers took position on public and private buildings to deter movement and enforce curfews. We received accounts of how neighbours in Dar'a could share parcels of food and water only through ropes stretched from window to window.

Defectors recalled orders to open fire against peaceful protestors. Soldiers who refused to obey such orders were dealt with harshly and even killed.

Many of those who participated in or supported the protests, or were simply bystanders, were arrested and tortured. Some were tortured to death. Several testimonies reported the practice of sexual violence and the rape of male detainees.

Places of sanctuary, such as hospitals, were used as detention and torture facilities for wounded protestors. Ambulances came under fire, and many of the injured and sick were prevented from receiving treatment in public hospitals in several locations, among them Dar'a and Homs. Evidence indicates that individuals suspected by the Government of setting up and operating makeshift medical facilities or providing medical supplies and care were also arrested and some tortured.

Children were not spared. According to reliable sources, to date, 307 children were killed by State forces. November was the deadliest month so far with 56 children killed. Others were detained and tortured. We heard about two boys who died as a result of torture. The father of 14-year-old Thamir Al Sharee shared with us the post mortem report and the x-rays of the body of his son. Thamir's wounds were consistent with the severe torture that a witness had described as being inflicted on the boy in a military security detention.

Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,

The Commission cannot overemphasize the need to halt the suffering of civilians in Syria. The Government must put an immediate end to the ongoing gross human rights violations, initiate independent and impartial investigations of these violations and bring perpetrators to justice. We strongly support the call of the League of Arab States for a monitoring presence in Syria.

Indeed, human rights monitors, including this Commission, should be given immediate and unfettered access to Syria. Independent and impartial scrutiny can contribute to mitigating the suffering of civilians and preventing further human rights violations. Equally essential is addressing the lack of accountability that shields violations of human rights. Allow me to note that impunity has been the norm in Syria, rather than the exception.

In light of its findings, the Commission is gravely concerned that crimes against humanity have occurred in Syria. Further, the levels of excessive force used against civilians, the scale of the attacks, their repetitive nature and their coordination lead the Commission to conclude that these crimes have apparently been committed pursuant to State policy.

Excellencies,

The Commission compiled this report with a view to making it both a call and a platform for action. The extreme suffering of the population inside and outside Syria must be addressed as a matter of urgency. Victims expect nothing less from the United Nations and its Member States.

Shukran.