

Statement on Today's UN General Assembly Resolution on the Situation in Syria

The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect welcomes today's adoption of a UN General Assembly resolution addressing the situation in Syria. After five years of bitter conflict, over 400,000 people dead, and six vetoes aimed at blocking efforts to protect civilians in Syria, the General Assembly has taken an important step in raising its voice against the ongoing and intolerable suffering of the Syrian people. The resolution passed with 122 countries voting in favor, 13 voting against and 36 abstaining.

Today's resolution calls for the immediate implementation of a cessation of hostilities and an end to all attacks on civilians in Syria, as well as unhindered and unconditional humanitarian access to those in desperate need. It demands that all parties to the conflict take all appropriate steps to protect civilians, "and stresses that, in this regard, the primary responsibility to protect its population lies with the Syrian authorities." Crucially, the resolution also emphasizes the need for accountability for ongoing violations of international humanitarian and human rights law which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The General Assembly's adoption of this resolution comes four days after the UN Security Council failed once again to meaningfully address the conflict in Syria due to China's fifth and Russia's sixth veto. The vetoed Security Council resolution would have established a seven-day cessation of hostilities in Aleppo, where Syrian government forces have launched intense airstrikes and relentless ground attacks against the eastern portion of the city that is home to more than 200,000 besieged civilians. The Russian and Chinese veto of the draft resolution was a vote in favor of continued bloodshed and impunity.

Throughout the course of Syria's civil war, every major principle of international law has been violated. All parties to the conflict, including terrorist organizations such as Da'esh, have deliberately targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure, and used siege and starvation of civilians as a weapon of war. However, the Syrian government bears a greater burden of responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity. For more than five years the Syrian government has systematically waged war against its own people, and has utterly failed to uphold its Responsibility to Protect.

All of this has happened under the eyes of the world. For nearly five and a half years the international community, and the UN Security Council in particular, has watched the Syrian conflict deteriorate. The Security Council has been consumed by internal political divisions that have crippled its ability to meaningfully respond to the Syrian crisis, and it has failed to uphold its responsibilities under the UN Charter to maintain peace and security and protect the Syrian people.

Today's initiative within the General Assembly is commendable. However, member states should not consider their obligations to the people of Syria fulfilled. The political momentum that made today's vote possible must not be allowed to dissipate. In keeping with the responsibility of the international community to protect populations when a state is unwilling to do so:

- The General Assembly must remain actively seized of the matter and take further action to address ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria.

- UN member states should urge the Security Council to call for an emergency special session on Syria in the General Assembly, utilizing the “Uniting for Peace” mechanism.
- Building on calls to ensure accountability for violations of international law, member states should explore avenues to pursue perpetrators of atrocity crimes in Syria since 2011. This could include the possible adoption of a General Assembly resolution establishing an international and independent mechanism to assist in the collection, preservation and preparation of evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Member states should uphold their obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, and offer sanctuary to the millions of Syrians who have fled their homes due to the civil war.
- Finally, we call upon all 193 members of the UN to sign the ACT Code of Conduct regarding the Security Council and mass atrocities, to ensure that no Council member votes against a credible resolution aimed at preventing or halting mass atrocity crimes.