

Syria: Five Years, Five Vetoes, 280,000 Dead

For the fifth time since the conflict began in 2011, a veto by Russia has blocked efforts to protect civilians in Syria. The decision by Russia to veto an attempt by the UN Security Council to reinstate the cessation of hostilities, establish a military no-fly zone over Aleppo, provide unhindered humanitarian access, and hold perpetrators of atrocities accountable, is a vote in favor of continued bloodshed.

Russia's subsequent attempt to put forward a second resolution was unfortunate and unhelpful. Despite some positive aspects to the text, by excluding a military no-fly zone in Aleppo, the Russian draft resolution appeared to be more about saving face than a genuine effort to end the violence and advance the protection of civilians. For that reason, it was only supported by four members of the Security Council and was not adopted.

Throughout the course of Syria's civil war, every major principle of international law has been violated with impunity. All parties to the conflict have conducted indiscriminate attacks on civilians, perpetrated sexual violence, deliberately blocked humanitarian aid, and used food as a weapon to starve besieged communities. However, the Syrian government has far greater military capacity to inflict suffering on civilians and bears a greater burden of responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity. For five years the Syrian government has systematically waged war against its own people, and has utterly failed to uphold its Responsibility to Protect.

With over 280,000 people already dead, today's veto condemns countless more Syrians to unnecessary suffering. The Syrian government and its allies, including Russia, continue to conduct airstrikes on civilian areas of Aleppo with barrel bombs, illegal cluster munitions, chemical weapons, and "bunker-buster" bombs. Since the collapse of the cessation of hostilities on 19 September and the subsequent announcement by the Syrian government of a renewed offensive on rebel-held east Aleppo, at least 376 people have been killed, including over 100 children, in a sustained attempt to obliterate East Aleppo from the skies. The use of indiscriminate weapons and the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

While the Syrian government is manifestly unwilling to uphold its Responsibility to Protect, the Security Council has also failed the Syrian people. Despite political divisions within the Council, the five permanent members have a special responsibility not to veto when civilians are threatened by mass atrocity crimes. Today's votes clearly demonstrate the need for all Security Council members to adhere to the ACT Code of Conduct in mass atrocity situations, which has been signed by 112 states.

After five years and today's votes, the Security Council has shown that it is unable to uphold its UN Charter mandate to maintain international peace and security with regard to Syria. Utilizing the "Uniting for Peace" mechanism, the UN General Assembly should now be allowed take up the issue. The long-suffering people of Syria cannot wait any longer for the Security Council to live up to its responsibilities.