

**For Immediate Release**

## **Ending Unlawful Sieges and Atrocities is a Prerequisite for Syria Peace, NGOs say**

The success of the upcoming Geneva peace talks must be measured against substantial and measurable progress being made in ending the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, ceasing unlawful attacks against civilians and releasing arbitrarily held detainees, a coalition of 15 Syrian, regional and international NGOs said today.

As a third round of UN Security Council backed peace talks aimed at resolving the Syria crisis commences in Geneva next week, the coalition warned that the process will ultimately fail unless the talks prioritize ending unlawful sieges and other atrocities immediately. “Achieving a lasting accord for Syria is not conceivable without developing a level of trust among Syria’s many warring factions. The idea that you can build trust while parties continue to systematically kill and starve civilians is absurd,” said Zedoun Al Zoubi, CEO of The Union of Medical Care & Relief Organisations (UOSSM).

The latest round of talks comes just weeks after the plight of the civilians in the besieged town of Madaya finally came to the world’s attention. Under a complete siege for six months by Syrian government and allied forces, the 42,000 civilians trapped in Madaya have suffered from a severe shortage of food with many resorting to eating plants, insects, and even cats in order to survive. The UN estimates that 400,000 Syrians are living in areas under siege, while the [Siege Watch](#) project puts that number at over 1 million people, for whom access to international assistance is deliberately and systematically withheld as a tool of war.

Various parties to the conflict, including the Syrian government, ISIL and opposition armed groups are using starvation as a weapon of war -- a tactic that the UN Secretary General has declared a war crime.

“It is not just legally and morally incumbent upon the international community to take immediate action to end unlawful sieges in Syria, it is necessary for the viability and success of the political process,” said Bassam Al Ahmad, spokesperson for the Violations Documentation Center - Syria (VDC). “No one wants to talk about preconditions for a political process, but the reality is that ending these atrocities is a prerequisite for peace,” he added.

In December, the UN Security Council unanimously passed resolution 2254, which sets out a two-year timeline for a political process leading to a new constitution and free and fair elections, under UN supervision. The resolution emphasizes “the need for all parties in Syria to take confidence building measures to contribute to the viability of a political process and a lasting ceasefire.”

The NGO coalition calls on governments with influence over the parties to the conflict to insist on an end to unlawful attacks, including the targeting of healthcare facilities, as well as a halt to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and the use of banned and indiscriminate weapons such as landmines and cluster munitions.

The NGOs also call for parties to immediately release all persons arbitrarily detained. Tens of thousands of people have been forcibly “disappeared” in Syria since 2011 primarily by the government, but also by non-state armed actors. According to NGOs, many of detainees are cut off from the outside world, kept in inhumane conditions where torture is systematic, disease is rampant and death is commonplace. The NGO coalition calls on the warring parties in Syria to give international monitors immediate access to all detention centers.

"The UN Security Council has repeatedly called for an end to atrocities in Syria but it has done little to enforce its demands, even though countries like Russia have more leverage with the Syrian government since beginning their military operations" said Ken Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch. "Without this changing it is difficult to be optimistic about the peace talks. Ending atrocities would go a long way toward establishing the conditions that might make the Syrian talks succeed" he added.

**/ Ends**

List of signatories: Arab Coalition for Sudan, Arab Network for Human Rights Information, Arab Program for Human Rights Activists, Baytna Syria, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Dawlaty, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Human Rights Watch, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Palestinian League for Human Rights – Syria, PAX, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations (UOSSM), Violations Documentation Center (VDC)

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For more information, please contact:

- Padraic McClusky in Beirut at [Padraic.McCluskey@crisisaction.org](mailto:Padraic.McCluskey@crisisaction.org) or +961 8 161 73 70
- Jamie Pleydell-Bouverie in New York at [Jamie.pb@crisisaction.org](mailto:Jamie.pb@crisisaction.org) or [+1 646 400 5522](tel:+16464005522)