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Statement by the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect, the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, on the situation in Syria

(New York, 12 June 2015) The Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect, Jennifer Welsh, the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Rita Izsák, and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, strongly condemned the increased number of government aerial attacks in Syria and the use of indiscriminate weapons, such as barrel bombs, including in civilian populated areas. They warned that such attacks could escalate retaliatory action by non-state armed groups, and consequently, increase the vulnerability of religious and ethnic minorities perceived to support the government.

“Government air strikes have reportedly killed more than a hundred civilians in the past week. Employing means or methods of combat which cannot distinguish civilian from military objectives is a clear violation of international humanitarian law. Not only has the Government of Syria failed in its responsibility to protect its populations from atrocity crimes, but it continues to attack its own people.” The Special Advisers and the Special Rapporteurs urged the Government to abide by its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

The Special Advisers and the Special Rapporteurs raised alarm about the broader consequences of the aerial attacks by government forces for particular communities in Syria. They warned that as a result of those strikes, non-state armed groups could carry out large scale reprisal attacks against religious and ethnic minorities perceived to be associated with the government, including Shia civilians who live in the besieged villages of Al Fu’aha, Kefraya, Nbul and Zahra in Aleppo and Idleb governorates, and Druze communities concentrated in As Suwayda governorate. If protection measures are not taken urgently, they stressed, entire communities risk paying the price of this conflict.

In addition, the Special Advisers and the Special Rapporteurs reiterated their concern about the on-going threat to the safety of minority groups in Syria, including Alawites, Armenians, Assyrians, Druze, Ismailis and Kurds, who are being killed, persecuted or otherwise targeted - primarily by non-state armed groups, including Jabhat al Nusra and the so-called “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” - on the basis of their religious or ethnic identity. “We call on all parties to respect international human rights and humanitarian law and immediately stop targeting people on the basis of who they are or what they believe and to do everything, in action as well as in words, to prevent further rifts and escalation of tensions along sectarian lines.”

The Special Advisers and the Special Rapporteurs also condemned advocacy of racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to violence in the traditional and social media against ethnic and religious minorities in Syria. In particular, they expressed outrage at recent speeches and media articles that dehumanise Alawites and Christians and call for their

conversion, or death. They recalled that incitement to violence is prohibited under international law.

All parties to the conflict, including the Syrian Government and non-state armed groups, are alleged to have committed grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in Syria that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Special Advisers and the Special Rapporteurs denounced the prevailing culture of impunity in Syria and warned that “it must be made very clear to everyone carrying a gun, or holding a command position, that perpetrators of atrocity crimes in Syria will be held to account.”

The Special Advisers and the Special Rapporteurs recalled the commitment by all Heads of State and Government at the 2005 World Summit to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, including their incitement, and to cooperate in fulfilling their collective responsibility to protect. “The protection of the populations in the Syrian Arab Republic is the primary responsibility of the Syrian state. However, in face of the State’s failure to do so, and with a situation of continued attacks against civilians by all parties to the conflict, the international community - and in particular the Security Council - has the responsibility to take timely and decisive action to protect populations in Syria,” stated the Special Advisers and the Special Rapporteurs.

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