

Syria: Nine Years of Atrocities, Impunity and Inaction

As the world's attention turns to confronting the COVID-19 global pandemic, we should not forget that this Sunday, 15 March, marks nine years of devastating conflict in Syria. Endemic violence and nearly a decade of mass atrocity crimes have inflicted tremendous suffering upon millions of Syrians. One year ago the prevailing narrative was that the war was coming to an end. And yet as the conflict now enters its tenth year, almost 1 million displaced Syrians are facing the imminent threat of starvation and death in northwest Syria.

More than 948,000 Syrians have been displaced in Idlib over the past three months, and over 1,500 civilians have been killed since the Syrian government and their Russian allies launched their military offensive in April 2019. The Idlib campaign has been an exercise in organized cruelty as Syrian ground forces and Russian airstrikes have deliberately targeted schools, markets, hospitals and displacement centers, terrorizing the civilian population. Civilians who have been able to flee from the violence have been forced to live in the rough under plastic sheets in sub-zero temperatures as displacement camps overflow to more than five times their capacity.

Throughout the past nine years the UN Security Council has consistently failed to uphold its responsibility to protect the Syrian people. Fourteen vetoes by Russia (including eight with China) have undermined international efforts to hold perpetrators on all sides accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity. This has created a climate of impunity in which the horrors inflicted by the Syrian government and its Russian allies are matched by those of armed extremist groups who also prey on civilian populations.

Ms. Jahaan Pittalwala, Syria expert at the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, said that, "Ordinary Syrians have paid with their lives for the international community's failure to uphold international law and universal human rights. Since the conflict began nine years ago, over 560,000 people have been killed and 13 million displaced. Only one thing is certain: if this crisis of diplomacy continues, more innocent people in Idlib will suffer."

The UN Security Council and UN General Assembly must use all available diplomatic means to compel President Bashar al-Assad and other parties to the conflict to cease their attacks on civilians. War crimes cannot continue to go unpunished.

The Global Centre's Executive Director, Dr. Simon Adams, said "the UN Secretary-General should mark the ninth anniversary of the Syrian conflict by traveling to Idlib and visiting desperate and displaced civilians who are taking refuge along the Turkish border. One million people in Idlib cannot wait for another anniversary. Their fate is dependent upon concerted international action, right now."