A Decade of Atrocities
and International Failure in Syria

Today, 15 March, marks ten years since the start of the conflict in Syria. Since 2011 more than 13 million people have been displaced and over 580,000 have been killed. However, we should not forget that the Syrian conflict did not begin as a civil war, but with peaceful protests during March 2011 against dictatorship, corruption and abuses of human rights. As mass protests spread to cities, towns and villages across Syria, the government responded first with bullets and then later with tanks, airstrikes and poison gas.

When non-state armed groups started to seize territory, the Syrian government besieged, deliberately starved and bombed civilians living in opposition-controlled areas. During military offensives launched by the government and their Russian allies, such as those in Aleppo in 2016 and in Idlib in 2019, airstrikes deliberately targeted protected objects – including schools, markets, hospitals, evacuation routes and displacement centers. Syrian government forces also utilized indiscriminate weaponry, including illegal cluster munitions and barrel bombs, to terrorize civilians. Entire areas of Syria's major cities and towns were razed or reduced to rubble.

The Syrian government has also used chemical weapons, including weaponized sarin, chlorine and sulphur mustard gas, at least 32 times against civilians in Douma, Khan Shaykhun and other towns. The UN Human Rights Council-mandated Commission of Inquiry has also reported more than 130,000 cases of arbitrary detention, abduction or disappearance in Syria, with the government being responsible for the overwhelming majority of cases. A decade after the conflict began, the Syrian government continues to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity as a matter of state policy.

Meanwhile, non-state armed groups that still control portions of territory in Syria have subjected populations to torture, sexual violence and systematic looting. Car bombs and other improvised explosive devices in populated areas continue to kill and maim civilians. Various armed groups have also used local populations, including children, as human shields.

Despite overwhelming evidence of these crimes, the UN Security Council has consistently failed to uphold its responsibility to protect the Syrian people. Over the past decade, sixteen vetoes by Russia and China have systematically blocked international efforts to end atrocities in Syria. These vetoes have enabled perpetrators to act without fear of accountability and have undermined the international norms and laws that protect universal human rights everywhere.

This crisis of diplomacy has forced others to be innovative in their attempts to end impunity. The UN General Assembly established the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of atrocity crimes in Syria. A number of countries have initiated domestic legal proceedings against suspected perpetrators under the principle of universal jurisdiction, with the first conviction in Germany last month. Canada and the Netherlands also initiated a process aimed at holding the Syrian government accountable under the UN Convention against Torture for its widespread use of a crime that has resulted in the deaths of 14,500 Syrians since 2011.

Dr Simon Adams, Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, said of today's anniversary, "we will never stop working with our partners to ensure accountability for what has happened in Syria over the past decade. We will not rest until we see more perpetrators in a courtroom. Not just for the victims, but because it is only by upholding universal human rights and pursuing justice that the international community will ever be able to redeem itself from under Syria's rubble."