

SYRIA

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

Head of state:

Bashar al-Assad

Head of government:

Wa'el al-Halqi (replaced Omar Ibrahim Ghalawanji in August, who replaced Riyad Farid Hijab in August, who replaced Adel Safar in June)

The internal armed conflict between government forces and the opposition, composed of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other armed opposition groups, was marked by gross human rights abuses, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Government forces, which were responsible for the vast majority of violations, carried out indiscriminate attacks on residential areas using aircraft, artillery shells, mortars, incendiary weapons and cluster bombs. Together with their support militias, they arrested thousands of people, including children, subjecting many to enforced disappearance.

Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees were commonplace; at least 550 were reported to have died in custody, many after torture. Others were extrajudicially executed. Security forces' snipers continued to shoot peaceful anti-government demonstrators and people attending public funerals.

Health workers treating the wounded were targeted. A climate of impunity reigned both for past and ongoing gross human rights violations. Armed groups fighting against the government also committed gross abuses, including war crimes. They tortured and/or summarily killed government soldiers and militia members after taking them prisoner and carried out indiscriminate bombings that killed or injured civilians. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes; the UN estimated that over 2 million people were internally displaced and living under conditions of extreme hardship within Syria, and that since the beginning of the conflict almost 600,000 had fled as refugees to neighbouring countries, where conditions were often harsh. It was not possible to confirm whether any death sentences were imposed or if executions were carried out.

Background

The internal armed conflict engulfed much of the country, causing thousands of casualties among the civilian population. Indiscriminate air strikes, artillery and mortar attacks, bombings, extrajudicial executions and summary killings, threats, abductions and hostage-taking became commonplace.

In January, the Arab League suspended its mission to monitor pledges by the Syrian government to withdraw armed forces from cities, halt the violence and release prisoners. Similarly, the UN Supervision Mission in Syria, established in April to monitor and support implementation of a plan by UN and Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan, ended on 19 August as armed violence continued. The Russian Federation and China twice vetoed resolutions at the UN Security Council aimed at addressing the situation in Syria. Veteran Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi replaced Kofi Annan in August but made no progress towards obtaining an agreed political solution to the conflict by the end of the year.

In February, the government held a referendum on a new Constitution that ended the Ba'ath party's long monopoly on power, but fell short of opposition demands for sweeping political reforms. Parliamentary elections were held 90 days later.

The government continued to attribute many killings of protesters to shadowy "armed gangs" and adopted a new anti-terrorism law in July. This was used to detain and unfairly try political activists and others on vague charges of committing "terrorist acts" before a new Anti-Terrorism Court which began sitting in September.

A bomb attack in the capital Damascus on 18 July, for which the FSA claimed responsibility, killed the Defence Minister and his deputy, the Assistant Vice-President and the Head of the National Security Bureau. Two days later, armed opposition groups launched an offensive that spread the armed conflict to Aleppo, Damascus and elsewhere.

In September, the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry established in 2011. The Commission reported in February and August that government forces had committed crimes against humanity, war crimes and serious human rights abuses, while war crimes committed by armed opposition forces did not reach the "gravity, frequency and scale" of those committed by

government forces. The authorities continued to refuse both the Human Rights Council and the Commission entry to the country. They also restricted entry by international media and independent human rights organizations, although these gained access to various areas, including some controlled by armed opposition forces.

The government announced general amnesties in January and October, but it was unclear how many of those arbitrarily detained were released.

In November, various opposition groups united to form the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was then increasingly recognized internationally as the sole, legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

The USA and the Arab League continued to impose sanctions on Syria, while repeatedly calling for President al-Assad to relinquish power. The EU expanded its targeted sanctions against Syrian officials.

Crimes under international law

Government forces and their associated militias committed war crimes while rampaging through cities, towns and villages perceived to be opposition strongholds in areas including Homs, Idlib, Hama, Damascus and Aleppo governorates. They carried out indiscriminate attacks that killed or injured thousands of civilians. Many of the deaths resulted from the government's improper use of imprecise battlefield weapons in densely populated civilian areas. In addition to dropping free-fall, unguided bombs from aircraft, security forces fired mortars, artillery, incendiary weapons and rockets in residential areas. They also used internationally banned weapons, including anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions, and systematically looted, destroyed and burned property and sometimes the bodies of those they killed.

■ Hassan and Rayan al-Bajri, aged 11 and eight, their mother Salha and father Naasan, were killed along with two of their neighbours when their home in Ma'arat al-No'man was hit by a mortar shell fired by government forces in July.

■ Twenty-two civilians were killed and many more injured when government air strikes hit the market in Kafr Anbel village on 28 August. Among the victims were Fathiya Fares Ali al-Sheikh, a mother of nine, and teenagers Mohamed and Jumaa al-Sweid.

Abuses by armed opposition groups

Armed groups fighting against the government, including some linked to the FSA, committed serious violations of international humanitarian law amounting to war crimes. The victims were mostly known or suspected members of government forces and militiamen whom they tortured or summarily killed after capture or after "trials" before unfair makeshift courts. They also targeted journalists working for pro-government media, and families of suspected members of government militias. Armed groups threatened and abducted civilians, sometimes demanding ransoms for their release and, in some cases, held individuals as hostages, including captured soldiers and Lebanese and Iranian nationals. They carried out suicide and other bomb attacks, and at times fired imprecise weapons such as artillery and mortars in densely populated neighbourhoods, used inherently indiscriminate weapons such as anti-personnel landmines, and prepared or stored munitions and explosives in residential buildings, endangering civilian occupants. Children were used militarily, mostly in support, not combat, roles. By the end of the year, armed opposition groups were reported to be increasingly threatening and attacking minority communities perceived to be pro-government.

■ Nine of 11 Shi'a Muslim Lebanese men taken as hostages by the armed group 'Asifat al-Shimal Brigade while travelling to Lebanon from Iran on 22 May were still being held at the end of the year.

■ On 31 July, following intense clashes, the armed group al-Tawhid Brigade captured 14 members of the Sunni Muslim pro-government al-Berri clan. Video footage showed the captured men being tortured before at least three of them, including a clan leader, Ali Zein al-'Abdeen al-Berri, were shot dead. The FSA's Head of Central Media condemned the killings and announced an investigation. No investigation was known to have been carried out.

Freedom of expression – attacks on journalists

All sides targeted journalists; Syrian government forces also targeted citizen journalists. At least 11 were killed in apparently targeted attacks, while others were detained or taken hostage. Other journalists died as a result of indiscriminate shelling or crossfire.

■ US journalist Marie Colvin and French photographer Remi Ochlik were killed when government forces shelled a building in Homs on 22 February. Journalists who survived alleged that the building was deliberately targeted because it was being used as a media centre. Rami al-Sayed, a Syrian citizen journalist reporting from Homs, died from shrapnel wounds from shelling on the same day.

■ Maya Nasser, a Syrian correspondent for the Iranian state-run Press TV, was shot dead, apparently by opposition snipers, while reporting on a bomb attack against the army headquarters in Damascus on 26 September. His colleague Hussein Mortada from the Iranian al-Alam news network was injured in the attack. Both men had previously received threats from opposition forces.

■ Ali Mahmoud Othman, an activist in the Homs media centre, was arrested at his home on 24 March. After an appearance on state television in April, his family had no further information from state officials concerning his whereabouts by the end of the year.

■ Mazen Darwish, head of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), and four other SCM staff, Abd al-Rahman Hamada, Hussein Gharir, Mansour al-Omari and Hani al-Zitani, were detained incommunicado following their arrest by Air Force Intelligence officers on 16 February in Damascus and were still being held at the end of the year. Eleven other people arrested at the same time were released, although seven were later convicted by a military court of “possessing prohibited materials with the intent to disseminate them”.

Extrajudicial executions by government forces and associated militias

Government forces and the militias operating alongside them summarily executed captured opposition fighters and civilians, sometimes in large numbers, during military incursions into areas perceived to be supportive of the opposition. Often the dead were found with their hands tied behind their backs, with multiple gunshot wounds to the upper body. Some were burned.

■ Government soldiers took three brothers – Yousef, Bilal and Talal Haj Hussein, all construction workers in their twenties – from their home in Sarmin, a suburb of Idlib, on 23 March. They summarily executed them in front of their mother and sisters, before setting their bodies on fire.

■ Scores of people, including many civilians not involved in fighting, were summarily executed during a military incursion into Houla village, near Homs, on 25 May. Despite government denials, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry concluded that “over 100 civilians, nearly half of whom were children” were killed there by government soldiers and associated militias.

Excessive use of force by government forces and associated militias

Government forces and militias routinely used lethal and other excessive force to quell peaceful protests calling for the “fall of the regime”. Hundreds of people, including children and bystanders, who posed no threat to the security forces or others, were killed or wounded by government snipers during protests and public funerals of “martyrs”. The authorities pressed some victims’ families to sign statements blaming armed terrorist groups rather than the security forces for their relatives’ deaths.

■ Mohammed Haffar, who owned a sweet shop in Aleppo, was shot dead on 17 May. He was standing outside his shop when government forces opened fire on a demonstration.

■ Mo’az Lababidi, a 16-year-old schoolboy, was among 10 people shot dead on 25 May by security forces and plain-clothes militias. He was killed outside an Aleppo police station while walking in the funeral procession of four demonstrators similarly shot dead earlier that day.

Targeting the wounded and health workers

Government forces and militias hunted down injured civilians and opposition fighters, some of whom were also ill-treated in state hospitals. Government forces also targeted makeshift medical centres set up by the opposition to assist the wounded, and the volunteer doctors, nurses and paramedics who worked in them.

■ The burned, mutilated bodies of students Basel Aslan, Mus’ab Barad and Hazem Batikh, who belonged to a medical network assisting injured protesters, were found in Aleppo on 24 June, a week after Air Force Intelligence officials detained them. Basel Aslan’s hands were tied behind his back; he had been tortured and shot in the head.

■ Osama al-Habaly was reportedly arrested on 18 August by Syrian Military Intelligence at the Syrian-Lebanese border while returning home from receiving medical treatment in Lebanon. His family was told that he had been tortured, but they received no official information about his fate.

Repression of dissent

The government maintained tight controls on freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Government security forces and militiamen detained thousands of people during demonstrations, raids on homes and house-to-house searches during military clampdowns. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of people were held incommunicado in conditions that amounted to enforced disappearance, often in undisclosed and sometimes makeshift detention centres, where torture and other abuses were rife and committed with impunity. Those detained included political and human rights activists, journalists, bloggers, humanitarian workers and imams. Some were convicted and sentenced after unfair trials, including before military and special courts.

■ Prominent human rights lawyer Khalil Ma'touq and his friend Mohammed Thatha went missing on 2 October while travelling through security forces' checkpoints in Damascus. Their families were told that they were being held incommunicado at a State Security branch in Damascus.

■ Four women – Ru'a Ja'far, Rima Dali and sisters Kinda al-Za'our, and Lubna al-Za'our – were held for seven weeks after their arrest by security officials on 21 November while walking in a Damascus street dressed as brides and calling for an end to violence in Syria.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including children, were widespread and committed with impunity by government forces and associated militias seeking to extract information or “confessions” and to terrorize or punish suspected government opponents. Methods included severe beatings, suspension by the limbs, being suspended in a tyre, electric shocks and rape and other sexual abuse. Detainees were often held in very cramped, insanitary conditions and denied medical treatment or even abused by medical staff.

■ Salameh Kaileh, a Palestinian journalist with Jordanian nationality, was tortured by Air Force

Intelligence officers after being arrested at his home in Damascus on 24 April, apparently because of a Facebook conversation and his possession of a left-wing publication. He was whipped on the soles of his feet and insulted. On 3 May he was moved to a military hospital, where he and others were beaten, insulted and denied access to toilets and medication. He was deported to Jordan on 14 May.

Some opposition armed groups also tortured and otherwise ill-treated members of the security forces or government supporters following capture.

Deaths in custody

At least 550 people, including children, were reported to have died in custody, most apparently as a result of torture or other ill-treatment. Many of those who died were suspected government opponents. Nobody was brought to justice for causing the deaths of detainees.

■ Brothers Ahmad and Yahia Ka'ake were arrested at an army checkpoint near Aleppo on 29 September. Days later, a relative located the body of Ahmad Ka'ake in a morgue; it had four bullet wounds. Yahia Ka'ake continued to be detained incommunicado.

Enforced disappearances

Government forces withheld information on the fate of hundreds, possibly thousands, of detainees held in connection with the conflict in conditions that amounted to enforced disappearance. The authorities also continued their failure to account for some 17,000 people who disappeared in Syrian custody since the late 1970s. They included hundreds of Palestinians and Lebanese nationals who were arrested in Syria or abducted from Lebanon by Syrian forces or by Lebanese and Palestinian militias. However, the release of Lebanese national Yacoub Chamoun almost 27 years after he went missing reinforced hopes among some families that their loved ones may still be alive.

■ Activist Zilal Ibrahim al-Salhani disappeared after security forces arrested her at her home in Aleppo on 28 July. Her fate was still unknown at the end of the year.

Impunity

The government took no steps to investigate the numerous allegations against their forces or to bring anyone to justice for alleged gross human rights violations, crimes against humanity or war crimes. The government maintained a regime of impunity,

including legislation giving members of the security forces effective immunity for unlawful killings, torture, enforced disappearances and other human rights violations. Nor did the authorities take any steps to investigate and hold to account those responsible for gross violations committed in the past, including thousands of enforced disappearances and the killing of prisoners at Saydnaya prison in 2008 and Tadmur prison in June 1980. In February, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry gave the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights a sealed list of senior officials whom it said should be investigated for crimes against humanity.

Armed opposition groups also failed to respect international humanitarian law, including by failing to prevent war crimes such as torture and the summary killings of captives.

Refugees and internally displaced people

Government forces launched frequent, indiscriminate air strikes against opposition-controlled areas, prompting almost all residents of these areas to flee. Others, particularly those from minority groups, also fled their homes fearing attacks from armed opposition groups. Many camped in the countryside or sought refuge in caves; others went to live with relatives or left the country. Refugees from elsewhere resident in Syria, including Palestinian refugees, faced particular difficulties in accessing safety.

In December, the UN estimated that over 2 million people in Syria were internally displaced as a result of the conflict, requiring humanitarian assistance. UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, said almost 600,000 Syrians had been registered or were awaiting registration as refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and North Africa, although the total number of those who had fled Syria was believed to be higher. Neighbouring countries allowed thousands of refugees from Syria access to safety and assistance on their territories; however, in mid-August, Turkey and Iraq curtailed entry, in violation of international law. By the end of the year, thousands of people were living in camps beside the border with Turkey in dire conditions.

Death penalty

The death penalty remained in force. It was not possible to confirm whether any death sentences were imposed or if executions were carried out.

Amnesty International visits/reports

✈ Amnesty International delegates undertook numerous visits to Syria and to neighbouring countries to carry out human rights research on Syria.

📄 "I wanted to die": Syria's torture survivors speak out (MDE 24/016/2012)

📄 Deadly reprisals: Deliberate killings and other abuses by Syria's armed forces (MDE 24/041/2012)

📄 All-out repression: Purging dissent in Aleppo, Syria (MDE 24/061/2012)

📄 Syria: Civilians bearing the brunt in the battle for Aleppo (MDE 24/073/2012)

📄 Syria: Indiscriminate attacks terrorize and displace civilians (MDE 24/078/2012)

TAIWAN

TAIWAN

Head of state:

Ma Ying-jeou

Head of government:

Chen Chun (replaced
Wu Den-yih in February)

Taiwan carried out six executions. As of December, prosecution and defence lawyers were required to debate sentencing and related issues in death penalty cases before the Supreme Court. Indigenous people were caught in protracted land disputes and the authorities failed to protect their rights as the post-2009 typhoon reconstruction process continued. Media monopolies expanded further. A gender equality education curriculum was implemented after a year's delay.

Death penalty

Six men were executed – all in December; 55 prisoners were awaiting execution and had exhausted all appeals. From December, hearings of all death penalty cases at the Supreme Court were required to include oral arguments on sentencing and related issues by both prosecution and defence lawyers. The panel of judges would then also take into consideration the opinion of victims' families in determining the sentence.

■ On 31 August, after 21 years of litigation, the High Court reconfirmed a "not guilty verdict" and freed the "Hsichih Trio". Other death penalty cases similarly involving torture and forced confessions remained unresolved.