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Briefing to the Security Council

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The Situation in the Middle East

[Syria]

12 December 2011

New York

I thank you for your invitation to address you on the situation in Syria under the agenda item "the situation in the Middle East".

The violent crackdown against peaceful protesters and civilians in Syria has continued unabated since I addressed you on 18 August. I reported then that more than 2,000 people had been killed and thousands had been arrested and detained as a result of the Government's reaction. In the four months since, the crackdown has escalated and the death toll has more than doubled. Tens of thousands have been arrested. And more than 14,000 are reported to be in detention. Exact numbers are impossible to verify, due to lack of access to Syria for my Office and other international observers. At least 12,400 people have sought refuge in neighbouring countries and tens of thousands have been internally displaced. The protests have remained largely peaceful. However, reports of armed attacks by opposition forces, including the so-called Free Syrian Army, against Syrian forces have increased.

Alarming reports from the city of Homs over the weekend show that the Syrian population continues to live in fear of further violent repression. Whilst my office has not yet been able to verify these reports, they are consistent with established patterns. Soldiers, tanks and artillery were reported seen heading to the city on Friday and Saturday, moving into residential areas on Sunday. Trenches have been dug around the city and numerous checkpoints set up between various neighborhoods, making movements of residents difficult. Internet and electricity have been cut in some neighborhoods. Snipers are reported to be present. Residents are afraid to venture out of their homes in search of water, gas and food. Fuel and medical supplies remain scarce. Fifteen people were reportedly killed in Homs on Friday, another six on Saturday and eight on Sunday. Reports say that two children were among those killed on Sunday, one 5-year old and one 18-month old, both killed by sniper fire.

Credible reports from a variety of sources received by my office indicate that the total number of people killed since the protests began earlier this year now probably exceeds 5,000. This number includes civilians, as well as defecting soldiers and those executed for refusing to shoot civilians. It does not include serving members of the military and other security forces and militias, hundreds of whom have also been killed.

This situation is intolerable. The nature and scale of abuses committed by Syrian forces since March indicate that crimes against humanity are likely to have been committed.

Independent, credible and corroborated accounts demonstrate that these abuses have taken place as part of a widespread and systematic attack on civilians. Furthermore, the breadth and patterns of attacks by military and security forces on civilians and the widespread destruction of property indicate authorization by, or at least knowledge of, the Government.

Since anti-government protests started, security forces and Government-supported *Shabbitha* militias have killed thousands of people through indiscriminate attacks on peaceful protests and funeral processions. They have conducted joint operations with a '**shoot-to-kill**' policy. Several defectors from military and security forces have said that they received orders to shoot unarmed protesters without warning. Snipers on rooftops are reported to have targeted protestors, ambulances, and bystanders who were trying to rescue the wounded and collect the bodies of demonstrators who had been killed.

Civilians have borne the brunt of the violence, as **cities have been blockaded** and curfews imposed. When blockades have been imposed, residents have not been able to obtain water, food and other basic necessities. Military and security forces have targeted residential water tanks and water pipes, while snipers have targeted people leaving their homes.

Places of sanctuary, such as hospitals, have been used as detention and torture facilities for wounded protestors. Ambulances have come under fire, and many of the injured and sick have been turned away from public hospitals in several cities. Evidence gathered indicates that individuals suspected by the Government of operating makeshift medical facilities or providing medical care have been arrested, and some of them have been tortured.

Reliable information indicates that Syrian Security forces have **arbitrarily arrested and detained** thousands of people. Some have been involuntarily and forcibly disappeared. The absence of judicial independence and the extensive use of arbitrary and incommunicado detention remain of huge concern, especially when torture and extrajudicial killings are known to be taking place. While the Supreme State Security Court was abolished in April, military courts continue to violate the right to a fair trial.

Credible information gathered by my staff demonstrates patterns of **systematic and widespread use of torture** in interrogation and detention by Security forces. The pervasive readiness to resort to torture to instill fear indicates that State officials have condoned it. Information received from defectors indicates that they received orders to torture. Extensive

reports of sexual violence in places of detention, primarily against men and boys, are particularly disturbing. These include reports of rape.

Children have not been spared. State forces have disregarded children's rights when acting to quell dissent. Killing of children by beating or shooting during demonstrations, as well as their torture and ill-treatment has been widespread. According to reliable sources, more than 300 children have been killed by State forces, including 56 in November. Schools have been used as detention facilities, demonstrating utter disregard for children's rights to education and personal safety.

I am appalled by these grave violations. I am concerned that this continued ruthless repression and deliberate stirring of sectarian tensions, especially in Homs, may soon plunge Syria into civil war. This Council, in its statement of 3 August, more than four months ago, condemned human rights violations and use of force against civilians by Syrian authorities. It called on Syria to comply with its obligations under human rights law. Four months later the widespread and systematic human rights violations have intensified. **The Government of Syria has manifestly ignored the pleas and the condemnations of the international community at all levels, including this Council.**

World leaders have repeatedly acknowledged the responsibility of Governments to protect their populations from **crimes against humanity**. The Fact-Finding Mission, the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and I myself have all stated that we believe crimes against humanity have been committed in Syria. The Government has manifestly failed to fulfil its obligation to protect its population.

I would like to echo the Secretary-General's call for the UN at all levels, especially the Security Council, to speak coherently with one voice. **Urgent, effective measures in a collective and decisive manner must be taken to protect Syrians.** While some steps have been taken, more needs to be done to halt this catastrophe. International and independent monitoring bodies, including my Office and the independent Commission of Inquiry mandated by the Human Rights Council, must be allowed into Syria. And humanitarian actors must be guaranteed immediate, unhindered access.

The **League of Arab States** has responded resolutely to the events in Syria and its efforts are welcome. It is imperative that Syria take heed of these calls and end deadly repression of its own people. It should allow human rights monitors in the country and cooperate with the League fully. We remain ready to provide human rights monitoring assistance to the League of Arab States if requested.

Inaction by the international community will embolden Syrian authorities, and ensure perpetrators go unpunished.

We can cite so many tragic situations where the **lack of proper investigation or accountability for gross atrocities has perpetuated violence** and repression. We cannot afford to make the same mistake again.

The international community must ensure that measures undertaken effectively protect the Syrian people and do no further harm.

The **Human Rights Council** held a **special session** on the situation in Syria on 2 December, at which it adopted resolution S-18/1 which strongly condemned the violations and appointed a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Syria. The Council also recommended that the main bodies of the UN urgently consider the report of the Commission of Inquiry and take appropriate action. The findings of the Commission corroborated the findings of my Fact-Finding Mission on which I reported to you in August.

When I addressed you last August, I stressed that crimes against humanity may have been committed in Syria. I encouraged this Council to refer the situation to the **International Criminal Court**. Four months later, the situation in Syria has deteriorated and gross violations have been committed with impunity. The need for international criminal accountability has acquired even greater urgency.

It has been brought to my attention that some members of this Council would also be interested in a briefing from me on **other disturbing developments in the Middle East**. I stand ready to respond to the questions that members might have under this item. I look forward to a fruitful discussion.