

# Hay'at Tahrir al Sham Commits Wide Violations in Idlib Governorate

Local Council Have to be Protected  
from Takeover or Dissolvement

**SNHR**

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights, founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, non-profit independent organization that is a primary source for the United Nations on all death toll-related statistics in Syria



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## I. Introduction and Historical Context

Recently, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) has been trying to gain local and international legitimacy in their areas of control by attempting to provide social services at the expense of mitigating its oppressive and coercive methods, whereas HTS tried to combine between the two policies at times. In this context, the group's media wing started promoting and repeating the term "civilian administration". However, it is quite clear by looking at HTS's Salafi-Jihadist, extreme structure, framework, and vision that the group is working towards establishing a governance based on its own understanding of the rules of Islamic law, which constantly leads the group to collide, contain, or infiltrate local councils, which varies from one case to another in the areas HTS took control of, areas its influence has reached, and areas where HTS has no influence. In the course of SNHR team's monitoring of Idlib governorate, it is safe to say that most violations by HTS were in this context, where HTS look at local council as a competitor in the arena of providing services, in addition to the fact that these councils are popular due to their national characteristics that aims to re-establish a state governance on national grounds – a goal that HTS is at odds with, even though most of the group's members are Syrians. Still, HTS lacks wide social leverage, mainly because of its extreme ideas, foreign leaderships, and widespread clashing with various local factions.

We also recorded several other violations in the course of HTS's quest to seize control and legitimacy from other factions. The most important victims, however, are civilian residents who primarily wish to live in peace and end the daily bombardment and blackmailing.



Only seven days after HTS was formed, SNHR called on, in [a statement](#), all the armed opposition factions that were part of the group to detach themselves from it, as anyone who joins al Nusra Front or al Qaeda or any other factions that are included in the list of terrorist groups will be deemed a supporter of them, and, thus, all will be targeted in the same manner. Al Nusra Front's farce attempts to leave al Qaeda won't succeed unless the group changes its ideologies, even if other factions joined forces with it or it managed to take over other factions, because what will and is happening is quite the contrary, where al Nusra Front will drown all of these factions, along with it, in darkness and nihilism, and put a target on their back. In addition, we have released [a report](#) on September 21, 2017, where we documented the violations Hay'at Tahryr al Sham committed during its raid on Ma'aret al Nu'man city.

Al Nusra Front follows a completely identical strategy to that of the Syrian regime who aims to reach a Syrian regime-extreme group duality, as other extreme, groups such as ISIS and al Nusra Front (the Islamic State of Iraq has also implemented the same methods to the letter), to fulfill this duality. Consequently, the group can establish itself as the only force on the Syrian grounds, and as such, other forces recognize that they have to sit and negotiate with it.

## **Methodology**

In this report, we will shed light on the most notable violations by HTS (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of armed opposition factions) between mid-July 2017 and the end of August 2017. These violations include killings, arbitrary arrests, security pursuits, and summons to Sharia Courts that targeted both activists and military fighters, in addition to raiding humanitarian organization bases and vital civilian facilities. This report contains four different accounts for victims who survived arrest and pursuit. We obtained these accounts by speaking directly to the witnesses, and not from open sources. We have explained the purpose of these interviews for the eyewitnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without presenting or offering any incentives. Also, SNHR tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible, and we gave guarantees to conceal the identity of any eyewitnesses who preferred to use aliases. This report doesn't cover the social, economic, and psychological ramifications. For more information on our general work methodology, please see the following [URL](#)



## II. Hay'at Tahrir al Sham Takes Control of the Majority of Idlib Governorate by Brute Force

Friday, July 14, 2017, HTS clashed with Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement (an armed opposition faction). The clashes involved a number of areas in Idlib governorate – most notably Tal al Touqan village, eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate- and ended with HTS taking over the village on the same day.

Tuesday, July 18, 2017, HTS took over Ibleen and Hzarin villages, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, after the group attacked a number of military checkpoints for Ahrar al Sham Movement. Subsequently, HTS advanced to al Habeit village that also was taken over by the group. The clashes reached Salqin, Harem, Sarmada, and al Dana cities in western suburbs of Idlib governorate.

Saturday, July 22, 2017, HTS forces besieged Bab al Hawa crossing on the Syrian-Turkish borders. On the next day, an agreement was reached between HTS and Aharar al Sham that would result in the latter withdrawing from Bab al Hawa crossing to Sahl al Ghab, as the crossing would be taken over by HTS. This was followed by a full withdrawal by Ahrar al Sham Movement from Idlib city. And, with that, HTS had taken over nearly 60% of the entirety of Idlib governorate, as the group's main areas of control concentrated in the southern and western suburbs and the borders with Turkey.

Following HTS's takeover of Bab al Hawa crossing, Turkish authorities completely shut down the crossing on July 23 for a few days, which reflected directly on the lives of the residents in Idlib governorate, as people particularly suffered from a severe flour shortage. The crossing was partially reopened nearly one week after, as non-essential and non-food supplies were banned, such as construction supplies for example, leading to a sudden rise in the prices of a number of supplies and resulting in more financial strains on civilians who are living under severely poor economic conditions as the Turkish Minister of Customs and Trade, Bülent Tüfenkci, stated on Thursday, August 10, that Ankara will limit the non-humanitarian supplies' movement at the crossing because the Syrian side is under the control of a terrorist group.



### III. Violations by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in its Attacks in Idlib Governorate

#### A. Extrajudicial killing

HTS used tanks and rockets in its offensive against Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement's areas of control. The group carried out a number of indiscriminate attacks on camps that house IDP – particularly in Der Hasan village, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. We recorded the killing of a number of IDPs in these camps, while it wasn't possible to aid the wounded due HTS shutting down roads.

In addition, we recorded an attack by HTS fighters on July 19, 2017, on a demonstration in Saraqeb city that called for the ending of clashes between HTS and Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement.

We documented the killing of no less than 10 civilians, including two children, two victims who died due to torture, and one media activists at the hands of HTS in the period of time covered by the report.

Mousab al Izzou, a media activist, from Saraqeb city, eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was killed on July 19, 2017, by an HTS gunfire as he was taking part in a demonstration calling for the ending of clashes between HTS and Ahrar al Sham Islamic Movement in Saraqeb city.



Mousab al Izzou

#### B. Arbitrary arrests, security pursuits, and summons to the Sharia Courts

HTS resorted to carry out wide arrest campaigns following its takeover of the majority of areas in Idlib governorate, in which the group targeted mostly media activists and relief workers who criticized HTS's policy on social media. In some cases, HTS used ambushes to get them.

In case HTS was unable to arrest a certain media activist, they arrest his relative to force him to surrender himself. This policy is widely and alarmingly seen in Syrian regime's practices. HTS's arrest involved mainly members of armed opposition that HTS had previously



attacked – especially factions who are part of the Turkey-supported “Euphrates Shield” operation room. HTS distributed summons on the individuals that they couldn’t arrest -to its Sharia Courts. These summons were, in some cases, for women who took part in demonstrations against the group.

### **- A rhetoric promoting violence and killing**

We monitored that some mosque Imams who are tied to HTS in some of its areas of control have mentioned some activists who were known for opposing HTS by name in “Friday Khutbas” as they called for executing and punishing them.

SNHR team recorded the arrest of no less than 82 individuals who are divided into 27 civilians and 55 military fighters at the hands of HTS in the period of time covered by the report alone.

On Friday, July 21, 2017, HTS fighters arrested a news editor that works for a media institution, who is also an activist in the field of local media campaigns. HTS raided his house and took him to a prison affiliated to the Sharia Court in his area, while they also seized and destroyed his media equipment, over a report on the clashes between HTS and Ahrar al Sham Movement in his area that was published on the website of the media institution he works for. The media activist told SNHR about the details of his arrest (all information that expose the identity of the eyewitness and the incident location were concealed for reasons related to safety).

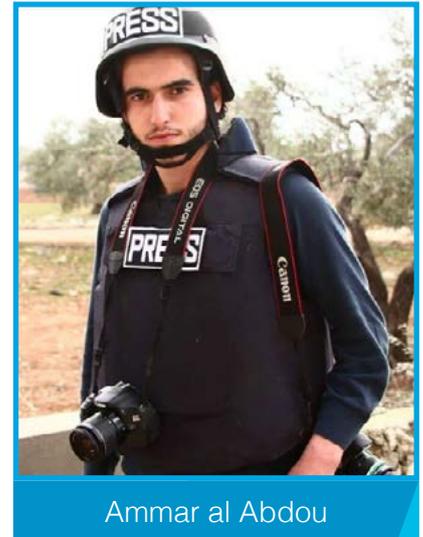
“They kept me blindfolded and in solitary confinement for two days, before they brought me for interrogation. The interrogator asked me about my work, and accused me of working with a secular media party that works in service of the West. During interrogation, they told me that I will be imprisoned in al Uqab Prison, a notorious prison largely similar to the Syrian regime prisons. They only keep the people who want to disappear them there. After interrogation, they transferred me to a mass cell with nearly 94 detainees and an area of 6\*4 meters square. I stayed there for four days, and the overcrowding was suffocating with the strong heat. Four days later, I was released, thanks to a faction leader that didn’t take part in the fighting. The leader mediated for me, provided that my trial continues while I am outside prison, where appointments were made for my court appearances.”

“Before leaving prison, the interrogator threatened that I would be arrested again if I revealed what happened to me to the media. After I was released, I learned that the mosque Imam in my town mentioned me by name and called for prosecuting and executing me because I am an infidel in their eyes. Because of this, I had to leave Syria temporarily.”



Ammar al Abdou, a photojournalist, 19-year-old, from Balshoun town, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. Ammar survived an arrest attempt by fighters from Fateh al Sham who is affiliated with HTS on July 29, 2017. Ammar told us SNHR, via Facebook, about the details of his pursuit and the death threats he received

“Security forces from al Uqab Prison, which is affiliated to Fateh al Sham, raided my house in Balshoun village at nearly 17:00 with no prior warning. I managed to escape via the window to the agricultural lands. I hid and disappeared until now. I learned from people close to me that HTS accused me of opposing its methods, inciting people to reject them, and filming reports depicting their oppression in the liberated areas. 24 hours after the raid, they warned me to surrender myself to al Ma’sra checkpoint, which is affiliated to them.”

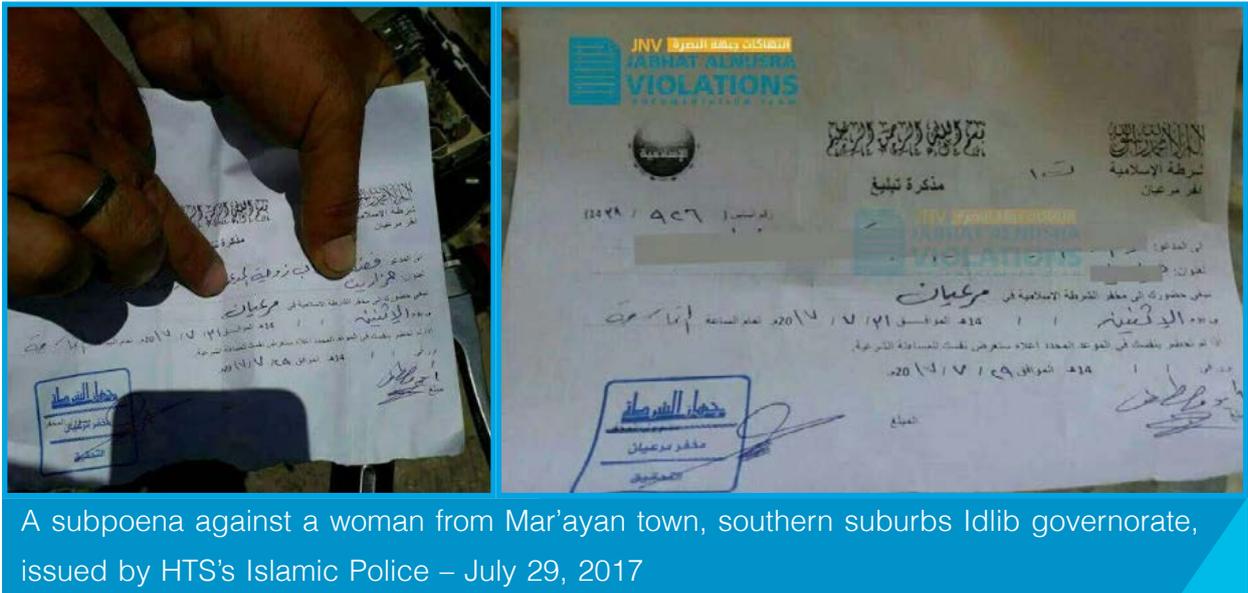


SNHR contacted, via WhatsApp, a woman from Mar’ayan town, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, who took part in an anti-HTS demonstration in the same town. HTS subpoenaed the women who took part in the demonstration through its Islamic Police. The woman says:

“Roughly on July 20, clashes took place in my hometown, Mar’ayan, between HTS and Ahrar al Sham that lasted for two days. Bullets were pouring on us like rain. Neither of the two groups cared about civilians during the fight. Our children were terrified. Two days later, as the village re-stabilized, we went out in a demonstration calling on HTS to leave the village, end the fight, and leave the village out of any forms of conflict between the factions. During the demonstration, we passed by a house for an HTS leader. Her wife came out and disparaged the women in the demonstration, leading to an altercation between her and a number of women in the demonstration. The demonstration continued until we got near an HTS checkpoint, where we asked to go back and end the demonstration, as they told us that the fight has ended in the village. We returned, fearing escalation especially that HTS usually opens fire on demonstrations.”



“A few days later, HTS members gave subpoenass for seven women who took part in the demonstration from the Sharia Court in the village on the basis of a complaint by the HTS’s leader wife that those women assaulted her during the demonstration. However, HTS fighters who are from our village told us that HTS used this passing incident that happened during the demonstration as a lesson on the consequences of going out against HTS, as they hinted that they would imprison them with no consideration for the customs of our society that considers arresting women as something that deeply offends the dignity and honor of the family.”



**Most notable detainees**

Ghassan Ankir, a member of Ahrar al Sham, from al Habeit village, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was arrested by HTS fighters on Tuesday, July 18, 2017, during their raid on the outskirts of al Habeit village. He was taken to an undisclosed location. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family.

Sarri Naser Wati, civilian, from Salaqin city, western suburbs of Idlib governorate, he was arrested by HTS fighters on Saturday, July 22, 2017, in Salqin city. He was taken to an undisclosed location. Sarri is the brother of the media activist Fares Wati that HTS seeks to arrest. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family.

Alaa al Ghabi, PR officer at Jaish al Nukhba, an armed opposition faction, from Ma'aret Harma village, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was arrested by HTS fighters on Thursday, July 27, 2017 in Ma'aret Harma village. He was taken to an undisclosed location. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family.



Bakri Rawndous, civilian, from Salqin city, western suburbs of Idlib governorate, 69-year-old, he was arrested by HTS fighters on Thursday, August 3, 2017, in Salqin city, over cursing an HTS fighter for his behavior. He was taken to an undisclosed location. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family.

Moufaq Saleh al Ahmad, an officer who defected from Syrian regime forces, from Abdin village, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. He was arrested by HTS fighters on Tuesday, August 8, 2017, in Abdin village. He was taken to an undisclosed location. His fate is still unknown to SNHR as well as his family.

### C. Raiding humanitarian organizations centers and confiscating their contents

In the period of time covered by the report, we recorded that HTS raided no less than six centers for relief organizations. Most of the raids were on July 22, 2017, over claims that these organizations are affiliated to military factions that are attacking HTS. Members of HTS seized the contents of the warehouses of these organizations, including food supplies, and took them to unknown locations. Also, HTS members arrested a number of the workers who work at those organizations and interrogated them, before releasing them later. We recorded cases of beating and opening fire on the guards of these centers in order to terrify them and prevent them from resisting any attempt to take over the centers or seize their contents.

SNHR spoke, via phone, with a relief worker and a warehouse guard who works for one of the organizations whose warehouses were raided by HTS on Saturday, July 22, 2017. The worker told SNHR about the details of the raid on the organization's warehouse, how their contents were taken to an unknown location, and how they beat him and threaten to kill him during the raid. (All information that expose the identity of the eyewitness and the incident location were concealed for reasons related to safety):

"I saw intermittent clashes between Ahrar al Sham Movement and HTS that ended with an agreement between the two groups that would lead to Ahrar al Sham withdrawing and HTS entering the city. When the area re-stabilized, I went to check on the organization's warehouse where I work. I called some workers to accompany me. When I arrived, I saw masked people spread in the road by the organization center. One of them told me that they are from HTS, so I showed them my work I.D. and introduced myself and why I came here, and they let me pass to the organization center where the warehouses containing the food supplies are. They also let the workers pass. Three hours later, an HTS leader came and introduced himself, and told me that he will be taking over all the centers that were affiliated to Ahrar al Sham or the ones they rented to organizations. I tried to tell him that everything affiliated to



the organization is separate and I told him about the organization's work and showed him the lease contract for the place which is owned by a civilian. He insisted that there is a relation between the organization and Ahara al Sham Movement, and his tone started getting more intense. He asked his fighters to get inside the organization and get everyone out and transfer all the warehouse contents to trucks that were waiting outside. I started screaming at him, and asked him to stop, and I told him that we can go to court if he has any problem with the organization. He asked the fighters to pull me out and beat me, and said that if he heard my voice again, I'd only cost him one bullet. They transferred everything inside the warehouses and left. As he was leaving, he told me that I can go to court if I have a problem. Of course, that didn't happen because the court is affiliated to HTS, and I was also afraid that they might arrest or kill me."

### **Most notable facilities that were attacked**

Saturday, July 22, 2017, HTS members raided "Hay'at al Amal Fe al Shamal al Souri" (Humanitarian Work in North Syria Group) in Sarmada city, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. They terrorized and beat the workers there, wounding three workers. Also, they arrested a number of workers who were released a few days later.

Saturday, July 22, 2017, HTS members raided the headquarter of "Ihsan Saraqeb" in Saraqeb city, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and seized the entirety of the relief warehouses and office supplies and transferred them to an unknown location.

Saturday, July 22, 2017, HTS members raided the headquarter of Viomis organization in Sarmada city, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and broke the locks and entered the relief warehouses, and transferred their contents to an unknown location.

Saturday, July 22, 2017, HTS members raided the headquarter of Beyaz Eller organization in Sarmada city, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, and completely removed the contents of their offices and warehouses, as they transferred them to an unknown location.

Monday, July 24, 2017, HTS members raided the headquarter of Jam'iyat al Manal in Salqin city, western suburbs of Idlib governorate, and confiscated the building and its contents for no reason.

Thursday, July 27, 2017, HTS took over the Islamic Court in Ma'aret al Nu'man city, southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, after they forced the head of the court, Sheikh Ahmad Ulwan, to either resign or work under their authority.



This large number of violations, inciting, and security pursuits forced many working local activists in Idlib governorate to flee, hide, or try to leave for Turkey in fear of death or enforced-disappearance.

### III. Conclusions and Recommendations

HTS controls wide areas and imposes its authority on them and the residents living there. The group also has, to a great degree, political body and a hierarchy, and they are bound by the rules of the international human rights law. HTS has perpetrated widespread violations by arrest and enforced-disappearance operations and taking over properties. Also, the group violated the international humanitarian law through indiscriminate shelling that resulted in the killing of many civilians.

#### **Recommendations**

##### **International community**

- Provide financial and logistic support for the active local councils who are in conflict, public or unseen, with HTS that is trying to take over or dissolve these councils.
- Support civil society organizations in Idlib governorate that are resisting extreme groups by raising awareness and providing services.
- Add the extreme Shiite Iranian and Iraqi groups, and similar groups, and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which are all cross-border and publicly supported by Iran, to lists of terrorist groups. Also, these groups should be targeted and restricted, same as Islamic extreme groups.
- Extreme groups thrive in wars and conflicts. Therefore, the political transitions process towards democracy must be accelerated, and assistance should be provided for the new Syrian state in order to restore security and stability.

##### **Armed opposition factions**

- HTS (formerly al Nusra) is the core competent of HTS and the actual leading force for its operations. The attempt to end all factions and try to reach the duality of HTS-Syrian regime proves its ideology is still the same. Therefore, all factions should detach themselves from it as soon as possible, and expose its practices.
- Organize awareness campaigns on the ideologies of extreme groups, and how to they infiltrate communities and recruit young fighters in parallel with workshops on respecting and defending basic human rights.



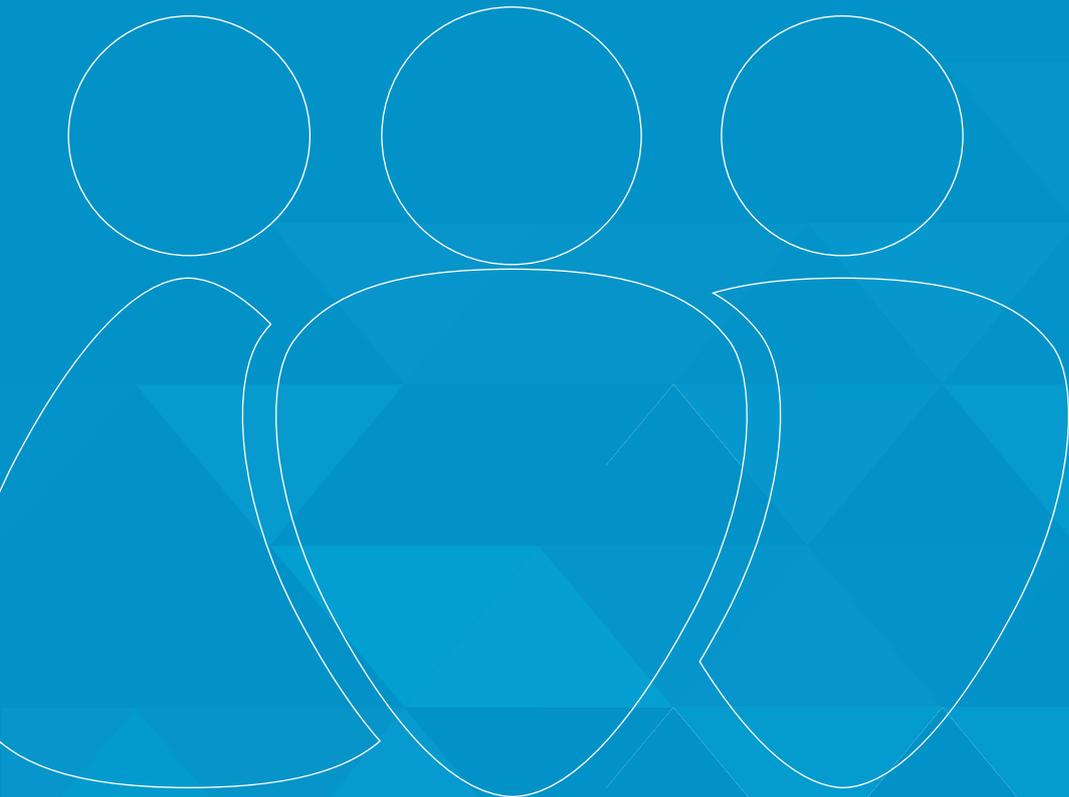
## Hay'at Tahrir al Sham

- Immediately stop generating chaos, fighting, and social resentment.
- Respect basic human rights in its areas of control.
- Immediately release all arbitrarily-arrested detainees.
- Return all seized properties and buildings, and compensate the affected organizations and individuals.
- Only verbally announcing separation from al Qaeda won't be enough as long as it is not translated into action in reality.\

## Acknowledgment

We would like to thanks the survivors and local activists who contributed to this report. Some of them had to risk their lives to reveal truth and hold those who are involved accountable.





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