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The UN Secretary-General Report’s Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict Shows that Syria is Once Again the World’s Worst Country in Terms of Several Patterns of Violation

SNHR is a Primary Source for Data on Violations Against Children Thanks to Its Continued Cooperation with UNICEF

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.
The UN Secretary-General recently submitted his annual report on ‘Children and Armed Conflict’ for the year 2022. The report sheds light on the prevalent trends in relation to the impact of armed conflicts on children. To that end, it summarizes the violations committed against children by parties to conflicts in various states, including Syria, in 2022, whether by government forces, pro-government groups, or anti-government groups. The report also assigns culpability for these violations, which include child recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and child abductions.

The UN Secretary-General’s annual report on children and armed conflict uses SNHR as a primary source for its data on violations against children in Syria, thanks to SNHR’s cooperation and partnership in the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) at the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

On Syria, the report says that in 2022, “the United Nations verified 2,438 grave violations against 2,407 children [...] that had occurred in previous years,” with these violations including killing and maiming, recruitment, detention and abduction, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, using schools and hospitals for military purposes, and denial of humanitarian access. Given these numbers, Syria ranks fourth in terms of violations against children during this period, only being surpassed by the Congo, Israel and the State of Palestine, and Somalia, and second in terms of the number of children affected by those violations. The report also notes that monitoring of these violations has generally faced many obstacles due to restrictions limiting access.

By comparing Syria with the other countries of the world, we detected the following:

1. Syria is the world’s worst country in terms of child recruitment and use of children in conflict.

2. Syria is the world’s fourth-worst country in terms of child-killing and maiming.

3. Syria is the world’s fourth-worst country in terms of military use of schools and hospitals.

When analyzing the report, we noticed the following:

1. The Syrian regime and its allies exceeded all other parties to the conflict in terms of violations associated with killing and maiming, followed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

2. In terms of child recruitment and child use, the SDF exceeded all other parties to the conflict, followed by all armed opposition factions/Syrian National Army (SNA), and then Hay’at Tahrir al-sham (HTS).

3. The Syrian regime was the party responsible for committing most attacks on schools, while the SDF surpassed all other parties in terms of the military use of schools and hospitals, followed by Syrian regime forces.

4. The report uses the term “pro-government air forces”. We, at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), believe it would be more appropriate to mention Russian forces by name, since it is widely known that Russia is the only regime ally that possesses an air force, a fact which has been established and proven in dozens of SNHR reports. More importantly, Russia itself has acknowledged in hundreds of statements that it has carried out hundreds of thousands of air strikes in Syria.

The most notable violations outlined by the report:

First: Killing and maiming

Out of all violations recorded, the report reveals that “the highest numbers of violations were the killing (2,985) and maiming (5,655) of 8,631 children” noting that the use of explosive ordnance, including unexploded ordnance left by the war and live explosive devices and landmines, accounted for 26 percent of the methods used for killing and maiming children.

In Syria, the report notes, “the United Nations verified the killing (307) and maiming (404) of 711 children” during the report period, making it the world’s fourth-worst country in this regard, surpassed only by Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Somalia. According to the report, about 53 percent of all killing and maiming cases were the result of war remnants explosions, while 30 percent were killed or maimed in shelling operations. The report attributes 364 cases of killing and maiming to “unidentified perpetrators”. Furthermore, Syrian regime forces were responsible for the highest number of cases of killing and maiming, being responsible for the killing and maiming of 178 children, followed by the SDF (People’s Protection Units/YPG, Women’s Protection Units/YPJ, and the Self-Administration’s internal security forces in northern and eastern Syria) with 147 children.

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Second: Child recruitment and use

The report documents the military recruitment and use of 7,622 children worldwide, with Syrian being the world’s worst country in this regard. As the report reveals, “a total of 1,696 children... were verified as recruited and used” in Syria in the year 2022. Of those, 1,688 children were used in combat. It is worth noting that the number of children recruited and used in Syria rose from 1,296 children in 2021 and 813 children in 2020 according to the same annual report.

The report notes that the SDF (YPG, YPJ, and the Self-Administration’s internal security forces in northern and eastern Syria) recruited and used the most children with 658 cases, followed by armed opposition factions/SNA with 611 cases, then HTS with 383 cases.

Third: Detention and Abduction

The report records that “Two boys were detained by Syrian government forces (1) and YPG/YPJ (1) for alleged association with armed groups.” The report further notes that, by the end of 2022, over 600 children, including foreign children, were still detained in northeastern Syria over allegedly being associated with armed groups, especially ISIS.

Fourth: Attacks on schools and hospitals

The report notes that “the United Nations verified 17 attacks on schools (13) and hospitals (4)” in 2022. Those attacks include attacks on protected persons associated with schools and/or hospitals. Of these attacks, five were carried out by Syrian government forces and pro-government forces, including two by “pro-government air forces”. Again, it should be noted that Russia is the only regime ally that possesses an air force.

In relation to the military use of schools and hospitals, the report records 50 incidents (48 schools, two hospitals). According to the report, the SDF (YPG and YPJ) were responsible for 42 cases, followed by government forces and pro-government forces with six incidents.

Fifth: Denial of humanitarian access

The report notes that a "total of 7 incidents of denial of humanitarian access were verified" with ISIS being responsible for three of these, followed by the SDF and all armed opposition factions/SNA with one incident each. In addition, the report assigns responsibility for one incident to "pro-government air forces". Again, Russian forces are the only regime ally that possesses an air force. It also should be noted that the Russian regime used its veto powers at the UN Security Council to block the entry of humanitarian assistance in at least five votes.

SNHR's Cooperation with the MRM at the UNICEF and the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Since 2014, the MRM has been systematically documenting and investigating grave violations against children's rights in periods of armed conflict. The MRM has been mandated in accordance with Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions. The MRM is invoked in country situations where parties to the conflict have been listed in the annexes of the UN Secretary-General annual report on children and armed conflict.

SNHR cooperates with the MRM in Syria by providing the data we have been able to document on a monthly basis regarding several patterns of violations against children, such as killing and maiming of children, military recruitment, abduction, arrest/detention, attacks on schools, hospitals, or medical/teaching personnel, sexual violence, and denial of humanitarian access for children.

SNHR underscores the vital and importance role of the MRM in Syria. We will continue to work and share data with the Mechanism, as with the various other UN organs that are active in Syria. We believe that this is part of the course of justice as it contributes to exposing the perpetrators of violations and applying pressure on them, as well as their supporters, as a step towards the goal of holding those accountable. It is our hope that this report will increase the pressure on all parties to the conflict in Syria, prompting them to stop perpetrating violations against children in the country.
