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.

**Statement**

A Welcome Development:
Rifaat Assad Charged With War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity and Referred for Trial for the Hama City Massacre of February 1982

**Wednesday 20 March 2024**

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.
On March 11, 2024, the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG) issued charges of war crimes & crimes against humanity against Rifaat Assad for his involvement in the monstrous Hama city massacre that took place in February 1982. The list of charges includes issuing orders for committing crimes of murder, torture, cruel mistreatment, and unlawful arrest, in addition to cases of torture, sexual violence, and enforced disappearance, all of which took place during the siege on Hama city as part of a sweeping three-week offensive in February 1982. At the time, Rifaat Assad was Syria’s Vice-President under his brother, the then-President of the Syrian regime, Hafez Assad (father of the current president, Bashar Assad), and headed the now-dissolved ‘Saraya al-Difaa’ (Defense Companies), as well as being the chief commander of the military operation in Hama.

These charges come after the Federal Criminal Court of Switzerland (FCC) and the Federal Office of Justice (FOJ) issued an international arrest warrant for Rifaat Assad on Wednesday, August 16, 2023, in connection with his involvement in the serious war crimes committed in Hama city in February 1982. With the list of charges officially issued, Rifaat Assad’s trial in absentia will officially commence. This marks a landmark development, with Rifaat Assad being the most senior Syrian regime official to be referred to trial under the universal jurisdiction principle to date.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) estimates that the regime’s 1982 barbaric offensive on Hama city, again led by Rifaat Assad, claimed the lives of roughly 40,000 citizens, with approximately 17,000 people still missing to this day. The offensive, which lasted for the better part of a month, began with regime forces imposing a siege imposed on the city in late January of that year, with a 20,000-man force launching their ferocious bombardment of Hama city at around 20:15 on the evening of Tuesday, February 2, 1982, under the command of Rifaat Assad.

After the initial, widespread, and indiscriminate bombardment of many neighborhoods, which involved the use of artillery and machine guns, regime forces carried out a multi-pronged raid, during which many field executions and indiscriminate killings were carried out, in addition to dozens of crimes of pillaging and sexual violence. Meanwhile, clashes broke out between regime forces and Muslim Brotherhood members in the city that saw the use of the regime’s air force and tanks which bombed houses with no distinction between civilians and fighters. Hundreds of people were arrested without charge, with some even being executed by shooting at point-blank range in the middle of the street.

In December 2013, Trial International filed a criminal denunciation against Rifaat Assad before the OAG. The organization, which spearheaded an extensive criminal investigation, was the primary group behind building the case and keeping it alive, with SNHR assisting by providing data and details on the Hama Massacre of February 1982, in addition to supplying contact information for many eyewitnesses. SNHR also supplied the OAG with a list of eyewitnesses and survivors who, with immense bravery and a spirit of hope, gave their accounts in pursuit of long-overdue justice.
SNHR welcomes this step by the OAG on the path to holding Rifaat Assad to account and bringing him to justice. We call for expediting these proceedings, considering this last February marked the 42nd anniversary of the horrific massacre. Another consideration is Rifaat Assad’s advanced age, now being 87 year old, and having fled from Europe to Syria, currently under the tyrannical rule of Bashar Assad, who most certainly will not extradite his uncle who would undoubtedly implicate Bashar Assad’s father, then-President Hafez Assad, alongside himself. As such, we must emphasize that the trial proceedings must at least commence while Rifaat Assad is still alive, which would bring a small, yet symbolic, sense of justice on behalf of the tens of thousands of victims killed in that massacre and of the bereaved families and survivors, who have felt increasingly agonized over the impunity for those crimes that has lasted for over four decades, with the Assad family remaining in power in Syria.
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No justice without accountability

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