

## Statement

### The UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner's Statements on a Supposed "Positive Shift" in The Syrian Regime's Handling of Returning Refugees Conflicts with SNHR's Documentation as Violations Against Returnees and Residents Persist

The Syrian Regime Has Arrested **182** Forcibly Repatriated Refugees and Killed **Five** Through Torture in its Detention Centers Since the Start of 2024



**Thursday 19 September 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 Friday, September 13, 2024, the National News Agency, Lebanon's official news agency, which is affiliated with the country's Ministry of Media, [reported a statement](#) attributed to Ruvendrini Menikdiwela, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which the news agency said had been made during a meeting between Abdullah Bou Habib, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants in Lebanon's caretaker government, and a Menikdiwela-headed UNHCR delegation, held to discuss the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In the statement, Menikdiwela claimed that the UNHCR has seen a positive shift in the Syrian regime government's handling of the issue of displaced people, adding that there is a momentum that can be utilized with respect to the issue of the Syria's early recovery, which would pave the way for the return of refugees. Menikdiwela also revealed that the UNHCR is working to secure the 'voluntary' return of 30,000 Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Syria in the near future.

The claims made in the UN official's statement are wholly inconsistent with the violations still being perpetrated by the Syrian regime, including gross violations, such as torture and enforced disappearance, with the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) still regularly documenting such violations and reporting on them in our daily news articles and monthly reports. Such claims also contradict the [reports issued by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, including its most recent report on September 9](#), and the [reports issued by the UN Human rights Office \(OHCHR\), including a report issued on February 13, 2024](#), which confirmed that many Syrians who had fled the war face serious human rights violations and abuses upon returning to Syria, as well as reports by international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International. It seems that Menikdiwela has failed to look at the overwhelming majority of these human rights reports which directly contradict her claims on this issue; had she done so, she would surely not have made such a suspicious statement.

For years, SNHR has worked to monitor serious human rights violations in Syria, including those committed against returning refugees. As our database attests, the Syrian regime continues to arbitrarily arrest, torture, and forcibly disappear persons civilians returning to areas under its control, not to mention other violations, all of them rooted in the regime's barbaric mindset that has not changed in the slightest since March 2011.

SNHR has documented that at least 182 returning refugees, including forcibly deported or returning voluntarily refugees, have been arrested by regime forces upon returning to areas under its control since the start of 2024 up until September 16, 2024, with these arrested people including two children and five women. Most of them were arrested by personnel from the Syrian regime's Military Security Intelligence force stationed at the al-Masna border area with Lebanon. At least five of the returning individuals detained there subsequently died due to torture in regime detention centers. All of this evidence further confirms that returning to Syria while it remains under the rule of the current regime poses a serious threat to the lives and safety of refugees.

Especially in light of the abundance of highly credible local and international reports on this issue, including those verified by the UN itself, we find that the statements made by the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, portray a wholly false image of reality. We have concerns that her professional humanitarian work duties and responsibilities have been compromised and distorted for political gains, guided by the interests of states, and that this may violate the rights of the refugee victims who the UNHCR is duty-bound to protect. As such, we call on the UNHCR to:

- Read the human rights reports on Syria, and ensure that such statements are consistent with and do not contradict these reports.
- Implement robust monitoring systems to monitor the fate of returnees in collaboration with local and international human rights organizations.
- Publish regular and transparent reports detailing the state of human rights in Syria, and debunk any false narratives that attempt to disregard or belittle the risks returnees face.
- Acquire binding guarantees from the Syrian regime to protect returnees from arbitrary arrest, torture, and other human rights violations.
- Call on donor states to raise more support for states hosting refugees, especially Lebanon, in order to manage refugees in a more humane way, and alleviate pressures that may lead to internationally outlawed refoulement.

**We further call on the Lebanese government to:**

- Adhere to the principle of non-refoulement, which is a customary legal principle binding to all states, by ensuring that no Syrian refugee is forcibly repatriated to Syria.
- Protect the essential human rights of refugees in Lebanon, and combat unjustified discrimination and pressure aiming to force refugees to return.

**We also call on the Syrian regime to:**

- End all forms of violations against citizens, both residents and returnees, to ensure a safe return.
- Hold to account all perpetrators of violations against Syrian citizens, compensate the victims, and dissolve and repeal all exceptional courts and laws.
- Give assurances to Arab states, particularly Lebanon, to not violate the rights of returning refugees, and to return their stolen lands and properties.



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*No justice without accountability*

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