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Agenda items 2 and 4

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[28 May 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Situation of Palestinians of the Syrian Arab Republic exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic

Overview

Palestine refugees have been severely affected by the raging warfare in the Syrian Arab Republic. More than nine years into the bloody conflict, fierce fighting and deadly violence have resulted in internal displacement, loss of livelihoods, decreases in the provision of public services, and extensive damage to civilian infrastructure in Palestinian displacement camps across the war-ravaged country.

United Nations data indicates that the vast majority of the estimated 438,000 Palestine refugees who remain inside Syria (PRS) require assistance. Almost 60 per cent of Palestine refugees in Syria have been displaced at least once since the start of the conflict and a third have had their homes damaged or destroyed.¹

PRS have also been struggling for survival due to Syria's devastated economy. An annual study by World by Map estimated the population below the poverty threshold in Syria to be 82.5%.²

Over 120,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have fled the country to other destinations, where many of them face a precarious and marginalized existence due to their uncertain legal status and limited social protection mechanisms.

Palestinian refugees in Syria displacement camps

The lockdown measures imposed as part of the anti-coronavirus battle have made the situation of PRS in refugee camps set up across the Syrian territories increasingly alarming.

AGPS has kept raising serious concerns that the lack of transparency maintained by the Syrian government regarding the pandemic will result in a catastrophic situation in displacement camps, at a time when the deadly virus continues to claim the lives of thousands of people across the region and the world.

AGPS has also warned that a projected outbreak of COVID-19 in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria could be catastrophic. Though campaigns to help spread awareness among the camps' residents have emerged, limited access to running water, pharmacies and medical facilities means displacement camps are more susceptible to the spread of the highly infectious virus.

Displacement camps set up in northern Syria are especially vulnerable as most hospitals and medical facilities have been bombed, rendering them out of order.

The Syrian government has reported only 121 cases of positive COVID-19 tests and four deaths from the virus.

Palestinian prisoners in Syria and the anti-Coronavirus struggle

AGPS has recorded the secret detention of 1,797 Palestinian refugees in Syria's state-run penal complexes, where 620 refugees also died under torture.

Affidavits by ex-detainees provided evidence on the involvement of Syrian government officers in harsh torture tactics, including electric shocks, heavy beating using whips and iron sticks, and sexual abuse against Palestinian detainees, in a flagrant violation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, commonly known as the United Nations Convention against Torture (UNCAT).

¹ <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria>.

² <https://www.citypopulation.de/en/world/bymap/Poverty.html>.

AGPS estimates the real numbers to be far higher due to the gag orders imposed by the Syrian government on the detainees' names and fates, along with the families' reluctance to report such cases over retaliation concerns.

In his press briefing note on Syria dated 3 April 2020, spokesperson for the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights, Rupert Colville, warned that Syria remains one of the countries where the risk of mass infections in prisons is extremely high and which has yet to take any such action.

The UN official also said "the situation in all official prisons and makeshift detention facilities is alarming -- and particularly so in the overcrowded central prisons, and in the detention facilities run by the four Government security branches, and in the Sednaya military prison".

"Even before the onset of COVID-19, we have received a significant number of reports of deaths in the facilities run by the four security branches and in Sednaya, including as a result of torture and denial of medical care", his briefing further read.

He added that vulnerable groups detained in Syria include elderly people, women and children, and many people with underlying health conditions, some of them directly as a result of the ill-treatment and neglect they have experienced while in detention.

Colville raised similar concerns about the risk to people detained in overcrowded and unhygienic facilities run by non-State armed groups in the north-west, north and east of the country.³

He further voiced deep concern that parties to the conflict in Syria are continuing to use essential services such as access to water and electricity as a weapon, and in doing so endanger the lives of large populations at a time when access to water and sanitation are more important than ever to help people protect themselves against COVID-19.

Recommendations:

- The Syrian Government and all warring parties should take urgent action in order to release sufficient numbers of Palestinian detainees. An outbreak of COVID-19 in prisons is very likely to result in yet more loss of life and misery.
- The Syrian Government and all warring parties should allow humanitarian actors and medical teams unobstructed access to detention facilities and displacement camps so as to be able to check the conditions under which the detainees/refugees live and assess their needs.
- We also call upon all concerned parties to ease movement crackdowns and restrictions currently hindering the delivery of medicines and medical equipment to prisons and Palestinian displacement camps.
- Precautionary measures should be taken and hygiene kit distributed in displacement camps and detention facilities. Authorities should also implement early detection and disease assessment strategies and tools in order to help contain the highly-infectious disease, particularly in overcrowded lock-ups and shelters.
- UNRWA, the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees, and the Syrian Health Ministry should be pressured to take urgent action in order to meet the medical and humanitarian needs of Palestinian refugees in Syria before the situation enters a point of no return.

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25771&LangID=E>.